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DONNA QUIXOTE

BY

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'DEAR LADY DISDAIN' 'MISS MISANTHROPE' 'A HISTORY OF OUR OWN TIMES'
ETC.



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DONNA QUIXOTE



CHAPTER I.

'WIDOWED WIFE AND WEDDED MAID.'

THE dawn came creeping slowly up over Genoa. It was the dawn of a beautiful morning in late autumn, when the Mediterranean shores of northern Italy look specially lovely; and yet this dawn showed livid and cheerless in the eyes of the watchers who became aware of its presence as they saw it stealing into a room in an hotel that looked upon the arched promenade and the port and the sea. 'Ugly night' is described in some lines of immortal beauty as coming breathing at the heels of the setting sun. The dawn sometimes looks uglier still as it comes breathing at the heels of the night, which threw at least a pitying and friendly shelter over tear-stained faces and weary eyes.

There were three or four persons in the room, and they were gathered round a death-bed. Albert Vanthorpe, a young Englishman of some three-and-twenty, had just died. The watchers had been with him all the night, and it was in the hopeless hush that followed the first assurance of his death that some of them became aware of the coming of the dawn. One of the watchers said, in a low firm voice—

'It is all over; there is nothing else to be done. I should like to be left alone for a little, if you please; I should like to be left alone—with my husband.'

One of the others, an elderly lady, seemed to hesitate; she stood as if about to plead some objection. The younger said with a beseeching gesture—

'Oh, yes; even you too, dearest! Only for a moment or two; you will come back again. Just a moment or two.'

The elder lady and the others left the room without a word, and the wife was alone with her husband.

She was a very young wife, not to say a very young widow. She did not look quite twenty; she was in fact a little more than twenty-one; she was rather tall, and had a pale face that looked as if the melancholy dawn were its proper setting. For all the haggardness given to her by the hour and the occasion, she was singularly handsome. She sat by the bedside of the young man who lay dead, and took one of his hands in hers. Her eyes sometimes wandered round the room which the dawn began faintly to light. A strange indescribable effect was wrought on her mind by the sight of objects that had belonged to him and now belonged to him no more—his clothes, some of his books, his watch, his chain, rings, purse; the presents that he had brought home to give to friends, the cigar-case, the silver-mounted revolver that he had lately been carrying—all these things that had no owner now; or, stranger still, had her for their owner. It was strange, indeed, to think that she alone had now the absolute right to sit beside him as he lay dead; that it was for her alone to say who should come into the room and who should be refused admission. It was very strange to think that people would come to her soon and ask her what was to be done with everything he had left behind, and that her word would be a law even as to the very place where his body was to lie. The other day she was a dreamy, impracticable girl, full of nonsensical ideas and preposterous schemes; and now she had a whole world of practical responsibilities put upon her and was absolutely independent of all control. She bent her face over the dead young man and kissed his chill, rigid hand; not again and again as agonised mourners vainly do, but once timidly and respectfully.

This was not assuredly the sort of grief which a young wife just bereaved might be expected to feel. In all the strain and confusion of the moment's emotions, Gabrielle Ronalds was distinctly conscious of this; she was as clearly aware of it as she was aware of the fact that the coming of the dawn was rendering the light of the soft lamps a superfluity. She knew that her regret for the dead man was not what the grief of a wife ought to be; and she was conscious of a painful impression that her putting on the aspect of a widow's sorrow would in some measure be like the playing of a part, perhaps like that of a professional mourner hired for a funeral. If she could have lived her life over again and could have known what was coming, she would have tried to love him much more than she had done; she would have compelled herself to love him; she must have loved him. Nobody surely could have deserved to be

loved more than he had deserved love from her. Of course she was inclined to heap unmerited reproaches on herself now, and to make a crime of what was in the truest sense a duty. The only fault of which she could even in this remorseful moment accuse herself was, that she could not succeed in loving poor young Vanthorpe. She had never deceived him or herself as to her feelings: he knew that she did not love him; he knew more—he knew that she had tried her very best and failed. Now, however, she kept telling herself over and over again of his goodness and her unworthiness; of his generous heart, his uncalculating, unchanging affection, which would have given everything and which got nothing; and she contrasted this with her own cold and deliberate study of her emotions and inclinations, and she told herself that she ought to feel penitent and ashamed.

After a while some one tapped lightly at the door, and she heard a voice calling the name that was his. She started, and turned her eyes instinctively to the bed, as if it must have been the dead man's name that was so inopportunistically spoken. She forgot for the moment that it was her own name; that, like all the rest he once owned, it belonged to him no longer but only to her.

When we spoke of her as Gabrielle Ronalds a few lines back, it was by the name which belonged to her as an unmarried girl. Nothing could be more natural than to describe her in this way, for in truth she had hardly had time to recognise herself by the name which marriage had given her. She has not yet been three days a wife, and she is a wife only in name. The last few hours of her married life had been spent in watching with others at her young husband's death-bed. All this is not so mysterious or even so romantic as it may seem at first. Albert Vanthorpe had loved her since they were boy and girl together, and she had sometimes thought that she could love him. But she had always found when he pressed the question on her, or she pressed it on herself, that she could not, and at last saw her way and made up her mind clearly on the point. He was always in weakly health and he went on a long travelling expedition in order to get stronger; and for a while he was growing stronger, and every one who cared for him began to hope that he had a long career before him. Perhaps he grew too fully assured of his own strength and he overtaxed it, and did all manner of toilsome and adventurous exploring feats, and he brought on his death. One day Gabrielle received a letter from him, dated from Genoa, telling her plainly that he had got

thus far on his way home only to die, and in simple, pathetic tones asking her to give him the one only gratification he now could have in his closing hours—that of calling her his wife even for once before he died. To her who knew so well his sweet, soft, somewhat feminine nature, this wish seemed peculiarly characteristic of him. She reproached herself that she had not forced herself to love him in time; and if he had now asked her to become his wife with the view that she might be burnt as his widow on his funeral pile, she was well in the mood to have uncompromisingly accepted the offer. She agreed to marry him, and she and his mother went out to Genoa together. There was no difficulty there in having his last romantic whim gratified.

The event which he expected was nearer even than he had anticipated, and he died, as we have said, within three days after his marriage. He had had a will prepared, and he had it brought to him immediately after the marriage ceremony, and he read it over and signed it and had it properly attested. Gabrielle wondered that he could think of such things then, but he smiled with a peculiar melancholy sweetness at her, and murmured something about marriage altering a man's will, or something of the kind—she hardly knew what. When this was all done and the lawyer was gone, he took her hand and kissed it, and told her he was now happy, for he had made her his wife and had made her rich.

'Oh, I remember all your plans and projects,' he said, 'and now you can carry some of them out. You will be able to do good to somebody, at all events; and I should never have known the way how, and so that's all right.'

He smiled another of his boyish smiles, and the smile brought a pang to her heart. She had always complained of him for being too boyish, and had sometimes impatiently given that as a reason why she could not marry him. He was older than she, but she had often talked and thought of him as if he were only a child. She was constantly complaining that he did not try to turn his life to any account, and had compared him more than once to Richard Carstone in 'Bleak House,' the young man who keeps to nothing, and dies saying he is just going to begin the world in earnest. 'If he should remember that now,' she thought with terror, and remind her of it, and tell her that her comparison was made good at last. But he did not remember it, or at least he did not say anything about it. He did remind her, however, that she had often told him that anybody with his fortune ought to be ashamed not to do

some good for the world ; 'and now,' he whispered, 'I am doing some good for the world ; for I am giving you the chance of doing good, and you know how to make use of it. So you see I am not quite such a foolish boy after all.'

Now it is all over. The dawn has come ; the young life has gone. Some one is calling to her, is calling her by his name, and she is now and henceforth Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe, a wife and a widow at once. She is very calm and composed to all appearance, and she goes out, and talks, and gives directions in a low firm tone, so that sometimes those who speak with her think she does not feel anything about what has happened ; and those who know a little more of her story say to themselves, that of course she can't be expected to care much ; that she had refused him before, and only married him now because he couldn't live, and to please him ; and that she was to have a great deal of money. Still, the German chambermaid thought she might try to look a little more as if she was sorry ; and the Italian nurse said she had seen many young widows in her time, but she did not remember ever to have seen one that took sorrow as easily as that. The English doctor who had been brought with the young man's mother and Gabrielle from Harley Street, and who could do nothing whatever but say a soft word or two to the hopeless patient, had taken Gabrielle's hand kindly in his and felt her pulse, and looked into her large tearless eyes, and told her to be sure she left Genoa as soon as possible and got back to the active life of England ; and impressed upon her in low warning tones that she must still have many duties, and that the husband she had lost would think she was most faithful to his memory the more she tried to bear up and do them. For the doctor read the story of her calm demeanour so differently from the German chambermaid and the Italian nurse, that he had formed an uneasy suspicion that the young widow was contemplating suicide. A woman is capable of anything, he said to himself, when she looks like that.

Meanwhile the mother of the dead man, who had been with him to the last, and had only left the room at Gabrielle's prayer when all was done, now sent in her maid to ask if she might see Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe.

The formality of the request surprised Gabrielle.

Of course she would see Mrs. Leven, but should she not go to her ?

'Many thanks, no. Mrs. Leven would come to Mrs. Vanthorpe.'

Another moment and Mrs. Leven came. In the yet colourless dawn her face looked marvellously like that of her son. Gabrielle was going to meet her with all the affection due to their common suffering, but the elder woman cut her short at the very threshold.

'No more of that, thank you, between us. While he was living I would not give him a moment's pain'—her lips trembled as she looked at the white rigid face on the pillow; 'but now he cannot hear any more; and I have come to tell you that I am leaving Genoa at once, and that there is no reason why you and I should meet in England or anywhere else. We could never be friends—never, never! I blame you for all this; if he had never seen you, he would be alive and happy now; or if you had married him in time, when the poor foolish boy asked you, he might have been alive now.'

'But, Mrs. Leven,' the girl pleaded with scared, appealing face, 'you always said you liked me—you always said you were so fond of me. You praised me when first I said I couldn't marry him; you told me yourself I had done right.'

'I didn't know then that the poor boy was so mad about you; I would rather he married anybody than have been unhappy. He was always happy until lately; and I know now that he never cared for his mother this long time. You have his name now, and all the rest. I don't grudge you his money—you know that. I am glad you have it, for it will help you to make yourself ridiculous all the faster. I have only come to say now that I presume you will have my son buried with his father and his people.'

Gabrielle made a gesture as if in utter deprecation of any sinister purpose on her part.

'Of course I insist upon nothing,' Mrs. Leven went on; 'I have no right. If cremation or something of the kind should suit your ideas, I have no right to interfere. I am told that my son's will gives you express right to do as you think fit in that matter too.'

Gabrielle did not know; she had not thought about the precise provisions of the will.

'Oh, yes; you have the right to do as you please in everything. I only ask leave to remind you that my son was a gentleman; that there is a burial-place where his father and his grandfather were buried before him, and where his mother hopes to be buried one day; and where, before that time comes, she might wish sometimes to see her son's grave, if modern ideas would allow of so much concession to old-fashioned sentiment—that's all.'

Gabrielle only said—

‘He is much more yours than mine, this poor boy, though he did give me his name. I don’t know how you can think I would do anything—if you do think it—to give you any pain about him; now, I mean;’ for she saw the expression forming itself on Mrs. Leven’s face which would have said, ‘Have you not given me pain enough about him? Did you not take him from me?’ So Gabrielle hastened to forestall superfluous contention with the one simple pathetic qualification ‘now.’

‘Well, that is all I have to say; and it is easily said. I hope we shan’t meet any more.’

‘Ought we to quarrel here?’ Gabrielle said, with a gesture towards the death-bed. ‘If he could hear us, think how it would pain him.’

‘I did think of that while he could hear us. You must admit that I never said a word all the time to make him suspect that I was not delighted with all the whole arrangement.’

‘No; you deceived me as well as him,’ Gabrielle said sadly; ‘I thought you were still to me what you always were before.’

‘I meant to spare him, and I did spare him.’

‘I thank you for that with all my heart and soul.’

‘Don’t thank me in his name. Let me be spared that.’

The mother went to the side of the bed and knelt down and remained a while there—only a moment or two, as if in prayer. The young wife leaned upon the window-frame, turning her eyes purposely away from what was passing in the room, and looked vacuously over the prospect of sea, and hills, and sails, that was spreading out clearer and more lovely in the brightening dawn. Her heart was full of pity for the bereaved woman who once loved her, and now seemed to have only hatred for her. The girl’s memory went back to days when that woman’s house was the happiest home to her; when Albert and she were children together; to days much later, when the mother and she good-humouredly engaged in competition, one to spoil the young man, and the other to strengthen him; to days when it no more entered into the heart of any of the three that they could ever be sundered in affection, than it occurred to them to think that the boy’s career was to end in mere boyhood.

She looked back into the room; Mrs. Leven had risen from her knees, and was going away. Gabrielle gave way to an impulse of old affection and devotion; she ran between her and

the door, knelt down, caught her hand and pressed it to her lips. It was of no use. Mrs. Leven went resolutely and coldly out of the room, and the young widow was alone again with her husband.

Never were two friends more devoted than the woman who had just gone from the room and the mother of the girl who was left there. When Gabrielle's mother died she had left her little daughter to the care of her friend, and had further made to the friend that faithful promise so often exacted by yearning affection, that if she could come back even for a moment, a shadow from the land of shadows, she would return to her friend to tell her of the whence and the whither. They were bound by the additional bond of affection that each was a widow, and each had but one child—at least, Albert's mother had only him to love. But look how things come about; a few years pass, and everything is unlike what the most cautious and calculating mind might have anticipated. The one thing reasonable would have seemed to be that this girl and boy should love each other and marry; and such seemed to be the arrangement of things developing itself, until suddenly the girl took it into her head that she could not love him, and that she would not marry him; and from that moment, as it seemed to his mother at least, all went wrong. The young man made himself intellectually and in all other ways the devoted slave of the girl who would not marry him. Her opinions upon everything were law to him; all her dreams, and whims, and odd new ways were the inspirations of genius for him; and the mother was not wrong in believing that a word from Gabrielle was more to him than a sermon or a precept from her. He never would listen to a word said even in complaint of Gabrielle's refusal of him. He was always a weak and tender-natured lad, his mother thought; and this was one of the reasons why she would have wished Gabrielle to marry him, for the girl's vigour of intelligence and resolve would have counteracted the defects of his temperament. He went away to travel, evidently still holding to a hope that he could persuade Gabrielle to love him yet, and having vague ideas of doing something gallant and good to deserve her; and his mother, too, still looked for something of the kind. But Gabrielle would not hear of it, and at last left the home in which she had lived so long; and Mrs. Leven being still a handsome woman, who had barely ceased to be young, was herself induced one day to marry again. Hers was a fitful nature, full of sudden emotion and impulse, and she accepted an offer of marriage, not very well

knowing why she did so, but having a vague idea that, as she had been disappointed in everything, she had a right to pay off the destinies by disappointing reasonable expectation in her own case. Then came the news that her boy was dying, and his passionate desire to be married to Gabrielle; and the mother was as angry in her heart with the girl for consenting to his entreaty now as for having refused it before. No question of money had anything to do with Mrs. Leven's anger. She had money of her own; her new husband was a man of considerable property. Her son's fortune, which was large, had all been left to him by his father's brother, who had made it as a successful railway contractor. Mrs. Leven had never liked him or his money either, and would, if left to herself, have much preferred that her son should be wholly dependent on her. Albert's having a fortune of his own to look out to always seemed to her the first cause of his coming to have ideas that were not hers, and of his being ready to accept the laws of life from the lips of a pretty girl rather than from those of one who had lived and suffered and known the world. She blamed Gabrielle for everything—her own second marriage among the rest. She blamed herself, indeed, for having as it were forced the girl on her son's notice; but she only condemned Gabrielle now all the more for this. 'Without this lass,' says poor Caleb Balderstone, 'would not our ruin have been a'thegither fulfilled!' Mrs. Leven now thought even more bitterly of her dear old friend's daughter. Without that lass there would have been little to suggest a ruin of her hopes, to say nothing of ruin's fulfilment. Yet she kept down all her feelings for love of her son while she and Gabrielle were travelling to Genoa, and only revealed herself when Albert's ears could hear no more.

It must be owned that the position of the young woman who is now left alone in the dawn with the corpse of the youth whose name she has taken is sufficiently strange and trying even for the bravest spirit and the healthiest temperament. A new life indeed is that which is opening on her. She is a widow almost at the very moment of becoming a wife; she has lost the brother of her heart and of her childhood; she has lost the friend who was a mother to her, and seems to have found an enemy instead. Gabrielle never before thought of the possibility of her having an enemy, unless when in some of her dreamings she pictured herself as fearlessly frustrating the plans of the wicked in the cause of the good, and thus winning the enmity of the children of darkness and being proud of it. She has lost much indeed; and she has gained or

had forced upon her what wise people would probably think most dangerous or fatal gifts for one so young and full of fancies ; she has money and she has absolute independence.

CHAPTER II.

'THE GRACELESS GIRL.'

SOME months had passed since Albert Vanthorpe's death. Summer had come upon London. Albert's mother and her husband were at home. They lived in one of the streets running out of Piccadilly, in a small old-fashioned house which Major Leven's family had owned for time out of mind. Major Leven's family had belonged to quite better-class respectability—if we may use such a phrase—for more generations than we venture to enumerate, neither sinking nor rising all the time.

Since Albert's death they had lived in seclusion—that is, a sort of seclusion. Mrs. Leven saw nobody in the hostess's sense, and of course went nowhere ; but her husband was a very active and busy man, and his doors were almost as constantly open as those of the good Axylus in the 'Iliad.' It was for some time a mystery to the friends of Major Leven and his wife alike, why these two should have married. Leven was fifty years old at least, and had always been set down as not a marrying man. But he had found much pleasure in the society of Mrs. Vanthorpe, as she then was, and in the people who used to go to her house ; and he took it into his head that she must be lonely without her son, when Albert went travelling all over the world ; and one day he asked her to marry him. As we have said, she accepted him out of a kind of spite against the destinies. If it were to do over again, she at least would probably not do it ; but he and she got on very well, and he was happy in his own way.

Major Leven had left the army, and had devoted himself to the wrongs of mankind. He had considerable means, and he gave up his time to the redressing of wrong. He had written more pamphlets and accompanied more deputations than perhaps any other man of his time. He had never succeeded in getting into parliament ; partly because he was always induced to come forward and contest some hopeless place where nobody but himself could possibly be induced to waste time

and money in such an endeavour, and partly because at the moment of every contest his soul was sure to be in some case of grievance which he would put forward as his great motive in entering parliament, and for which the constituents whose favour he sought could not be induced to care a rush. The chiefs and managers of parties swore at him a good deal among themselves, for he was always disturbing the arrangements of head-quarters everywhere and splitting up constituencies. When a contest between some representative of his own political party and an opponent was so nicely balanced as to leave to his own side only a confident hope of success, Major Leven was sure to appear in the field as the exponent of some cause, or case, or grievance, for which the chiefs cared nothing, to present himself as a candidate on that platform, and carry off just enough of eccentric votes to make the victory sure to the enemies of the party with whom, to use the correct phrase, Major Leven usually acted. If any foreign or colonial difficulty arose in the way of the Government, no matter to what party the Government belonged, Major Leven was instantly out with a pamphlet, in which, by the aid of portentous local knowledge, he made it clear that Her Majesty's ministers had bungled the affair from first to last; that their official instructors evidently could not even find out on the map the places particularly concerned; that no one in the Government service knew any of the languages which the emergency required to be known; that he, Major Leven, had predicted in a pamphlet years before exactly what would happen, and at the same time shown exactly what ought to be done; and that he could even now in ten minutes put any intelligent schoolboy in possession of knowledge enough to enable him to pull the Government out of the whole difficulty, if the Government would only have wit enough to allow themselves to be saved.

In private life Major Leven liked everybody and could hardly be persuaded to think ill of anybody; but his creed as an observer of public men apparently was, that every Secretary of State was a double-dyed and unmitigated villain bent upon the ruin of his country. Major Leven believed what everyone told him, unless it were the statement of a minister made in public; for all such statements he regarded as outrageous lies. His general impression was that all ministers, but more especially foreign and colonial ministers, were scoundrels who ought to be impeached.

With all this, Major Leven was not a self-asserting or bumptious man. He was in manner a very modest, courteous, kindly

gentleman; a little grave and heavy, as indeed was unavoidable in the case of one who bore on his shoulders such a burden of grievance. An over-sensitive humanity, an implicit belief in what anybody told him in private, and a chivalric restlessness which did not allow him to hear of any grievance without feeling himself at once called to rush to the rescue, made him occasionally somewhat of a trouble to his friends.

He had no judgment whatever as to the rights and wrongs of any particular controversy, and was indeed generally secured by the side which first appealed to his attention. But he had considerable cleverness, when once a conviction had taken hold of him, in finding arguments to convince outsiders that that was the true side of the case. He had served a good deal and been in many parts of the world. When any grievance was brought under his notice, he had no difficulty in recalling some experience of his own which supplied him with reason for assuming that the wrong had been done. When he was at the Cape, just the same sort of treachery had been shown to one of the native chiefs; when he was at Rawul-Pindee he had had to interfere himself in exactly such a case of cruelty to a servant; he knew of his own knowledge in the Mauritius that a fellow had been promoted to a most important office for no other reason in the world than because he had married the favourite maid of the Governor's wife; and so on, through various other instances. Thus Major Leven was always able at a moment's notice to call himself as evidence to the truth of any case of alleged injustice about which it would be proper to worry a department.

Mrs. Leven was a good listener; at least, she always seemed to listen to her husband's arguments and explanations, and was never seemingly tired. Her great quality for this purpose was a faculty of self-abstraction. At present she had only one thought occupying her mind, and that concerned her dead son and the girl he had married. But she listened with an air of deep attention; and the air was not assumed, for she was absorbed in her own thoughts, only Major Leven naturally assumed that she was absorbed in his grievances and not hers, and he was content with his audience.

Major Leven and his wife were at breakfast together. The table on Leven's side was covered with letters, newspapers, pamphlets, and proofs. It was thus he liked to breakfast. During the meal he had been interrupted more than once by important visitors; he liked to be interrupted. One of the visitors was young Walter Manny Taxal, second son of Lord Taxal, a nobleman who had been elevated to the peerage because

he had finally proved his utter incapacity to serve his party in the House of Commons. Young Walter Manny Taxal was a fresh and clever youth with two sides to his character; he was an amateur musician and a popular agitator. He had a stronger voice than Major Leven and was a better speaker; but he believed in Leven, and was delighted to take his tone from him. He was about to preside this night over a great meeting of working men in St. James's Hall, and had come in to get some advice from Leven as to what he ought to say. The matter had been talked over, and Walter Manny was going away when he suddenly said—

'Oh, by the way, Mrs. Leven, you can tell me, no doubt. May I call upon your daughter—or would she rather I didn't yet awhile? I should like to, if I might.'

'On Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe?'

'Exactly; yes; Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe. I saw her in town yesterday. She is looking pale, but she is very handsome; handsomer than ever, I think.'

'I have not seen her,' Mrs. Leven said slowly, 'since my son's death. I don't know if she receives visits or not; I do not even know where she lives.'

'Oh, she lives in poor Albert's house, you know.'

'I presume so; I don't know.'

Walter Manny saw that he had, as he would have said himself, put his foot in it; he dropped the subject, and presently took his leave. Then Major Leven turned to his wife:

'Don't you think, you know, Constance, that the time has come to forget and forgive? Time to hold out the olive-branch a little, as old Melbourne used to say?'

'Not much time has passed, George; and I don't know that mere lapse of time does much in cases like mine. You can't be expected to feel as I do. I don't make any accusation of that, dear; but he was nothing to you; I mean, he was not a son, and you could not understand how a mother feels. Why, the grass is hardly green on my boy's grave, and you talk of olive-branches.'

'Yes, yes, of course it's not long ago; and I know it's too soon for you not to feel as much as ever; but it isn't exactly that. I think you are wrong, Constance—I do, indeed—in putting any of the blame on her. You ladies are always a little unreasonable; and—you don't mind my speaking on so painful a subject?—I asked Dr. Saville particularly, and he told me most positively that poor Albert's death was certain years and years ago.'

Mrs. Leven only shook her head, but said nothing on this subject. She declined to be set right on a matter of such heart-and-soul conviction as that of the wrong done to her by her former favourite.

'I am told she never put on mourning for him,' Mrs. Leven said after a moment's pause, the uneasiness of which was chiefly occasioned to Major Leven by the fact that he had not yet quite got the particular thing said which he wanted to say; 'she dressed the day after his death just as she did the day before. So they tell me.'

Major Leven was about to suggest that there might possibly be philosophical reasons very imperative on certain minds for wearing mourning before a melancholy and certain event rather than after it. But he checked himself in time, and spared his wife a speculation into which she could hardly be expected to enter very earnestly just then. Major Leven had in truth hardly known anything of poor Albert, and could only do his best to keep up with the feelings of his wife.

'All these new ideas, I suppose,' he said. 'You rather liked them at one time, Constance.'

'I did,' said Constance sadly. 'I did not know then that they could take any real hold on anybody's mind.'

'Still, really, you know, you ought not to blame her too much; and I do think, Constance, the time has come for making up the whole quarrel. I don't want to dictate to you, of course; but it's a sort of duty on my part—quite a duty, I feel it—to press you a little on this point. And then, another thing'—he began to gain courage and resolution—'there is that other son of yours. I don't know all the rights and wrongs of the story, but he must have been very young when you and he didn't get along; and time has passed away, and he may have changed; and some sad things have happened, and we must not bear anger always; and I do think, Constance, you would do well to turn this over in your mind sometimes, and to remember that if you have lost a son you still have a son.'

'How do I know that I have a son?' she asked. 'For all these long years he has never taken any pains to remind me that I had such a son. How do I know whether he is living or dead? How do I know, if he is still living, into what sort of life he has fallen? How do I know what his associates are, or his ways of life? He may have married a gipsy or a dancing-woman for all I know.'

'He hasn't behaved well in not writing to you all this time, that's quite clear. A fellow's mother is his mother always, how-

ever they may have quarrelled ; but I fancy, Constance, he may have had a little of his mother's temperament in him, and for that, my dear, if you will allow me to say so, you are more responsible than he. But anyhow, I don't mean to press this matter on you all at once. Just think it over, that's all I say. I felt it my duty to remind you of it. That's all.'

Mrs. Leven made no answer ; one of her principles was that, a woman should never contradict her husband. She held that the man was always to be regarded as supreme in his household, but she did not feel bound to translate her acknowledgment of his supremacy into action. She felt quite free to do just as she liked. She had not the least intention of acting on his advice in this case.

'Do you hear anything about her ?' Major Leven asked ; 'anything more, I mean, than that she hasn't put on mourning.'

Major Leven was really much interested in the fortunes of Albert's young wife. He had greatly admired Gabrielle when he used to meet her at Mrs. Leven's ; she had always entered cordially into his projects. He was not by any means unconscious that with a good many purposeless persons he passed for a sort of bore ; and he should in all ordinary cases have set down a handsome young woman as the least likely person in the world to enter cordially into his ideas. But Gabrielle had always paid him the delightful homage of an evidently genuine interest in any project that he might have had in hand. He had seen her eyes sparkle with generous anger when he denounced the iniquity of some Secretary of State or other official ; she had come eagerly towards him to ask him about the result of some deputation to the Foreign or the Colonial Office concerning intolerable wrong inflicted on some meritorious race or individual.

'I do hear about her now and then,' his wife answered in a hesitating way, as if it were against her principles to own to any interest in such a woman. 'I dare say she is forming a home for decayed old gentlewomen, or something of that kind ; or for strayed cats, perhaps ; I am not quite certain which. It is of no consequence, in any case. It won't last long with her ; she will want some new piece of folly before long.'

Major Leven moved in his chair somewhat uneasily.

'But,' he said, 'excuse me, Constance, did you actually hear that she was getting up a home for strayed cats ? It would not be a bad thing to do by any means, and I shouldn't think the worse of her ; only, is she doing anything of the kind, or is this only your conjecture ?'

'I don't hear much about her; I don't desire to; but Mrs. Bramble, the wife of Albert's old servant—you remember him?—comes sometimes here, and I have seen her, and she has told me now and then things about her. I did not ask her, but one could hardly refuse to listen to the poor old woman.'

'Of course not. Certainly not. Why should you refuse? Well, she told you——?'

'Oh, well, nothing very much, but that the young woman has all sorts of ridiculous persons coming to see her in Albert's house, and makes it, I fancy, a sort of refuge for the destitute. Mrs. Bramble is her housekeeper, and old Thomas Bramble; I believe she considers them her friends, and entertains their poor relations; and there was something about a distressed cat—I have forgotten what it was. At all events, I know that my boy's house is desecrated by her whims.'

Major Leven did not discuss the question any farther. He did not see much harm in what was told of Gabrielle, even if the worst were true. He was sure she would never forget to behave like a lady, he said to himself; from what he had seen of her he was quite satisfied that she would always be a lady. So he presently went to his pamphlets and his deputations, not wholly dissatisfied with what he had said to his wife about her living son, and what he had heard her say about Gabrielle. She *does* keep asking questions about Gabrielle, or getting to know about her somehow, he thought. The reminder about the son will keep working in her memory.

Meanwhile, the young woman about whom the Levens had been talking was not engaged in organising a home for decayed ladies, or cats, or sufferers of any kind. It suited the warmth and bitterness of Mrs. Leven's present mood to represent her as a restless organiser of all manner of schemes and novelties; but in truth Gabrielle had very little of the disciplined temperament which makes itself systematically useful. She was one of the last persons in the world likely to be of use as a member of a ladies' committee, nor had she of her own prompting much interest in an abstraction called a 'cause' of any kind. She used to admire Major Leven very much for the readiness with which he could at a moment's notice throw himself into the championship of people he had never seen; the genuine anger which he could feel towards an entire department of Government; the completeness with which he could enter into the cause, so to speak, of a whole parallel of latitude. She had often envied him this faculty, and blamed herself because she had not more of the same sort of spirit. But her own feelings

were awakened chiefly by the condition of some particular man or woman. Her impulse towards help was always to hold out the helping hand herself. She was quite conscious that she wanted all the discipline of nature which makes a successful and useful worker in any good cause, and she assumed that she lacked that faculty because she was a woman and not a man. Wealth and poverty, we used to read in the days when Lindley Murray was yet studied, are both temptations. 'This excites pride; that discontent.' Neither temptation was put in the way of Gabrielle. In her early days she had been left with only a slender provision for herself; but, on the other hand, she had passed nearly all her growing years with Mrs. Leven, in whose household she certainly saw nothing like great wealth as wealth is rated in our times, but she always saw the evidences of sufficient money liberally spent. She never heard any talk of difficulties arising out of the want of money, except among the class who were generically described as 'the poor.' Mrs. Leven was a woman who delighted in having everything happy about her, and in hearing that she made those around her happy. Albert had his mother's love of happiness joined with a sweet, sunny temper all his own, which had none of his mother's fitfulness and sudden strong gusts of emotion. One might have thought a girl brought up amid such companionship would have taken the world easily and as it came, and readily accepted the conditions of things that showed so favourably for her.

But, whether from nature or from the sheer force of contrast, Gabrielle grew up the most impatient of mortals, so far as all arrangements here below were concerned. The framework of human society seemed to her to have got all out of gear; and what amused her friends more, she always went on as if on her were imposed in some way the duty of trying to put things right. She would stop in the streets, if she might, to argue with a drunken man, and convince him of the evil of the course he was pursuing. If a red-faced woman at an apple stall seemed chilly in the keen air of spring, Gabrielle regarded her as a victim to the unequal laws of society, and wondered that no one would take her home, and give her some warmth and shelter until the summer days should come, when she might follow her trade in the sun without suffering from east winds and cold blasts. Nothing would have given the girl more pleasure than to seat herself at the stall every now and then and attend to the sales, in order to allow the poor appleseller an occasional relief. She was constantly bringing all

manner of objects of charity to the house which was her home. Some of the stories Mrs. Leven had heard were true enough. Outcast dogs, affrighted cats hunted of hideous schoolboys, ragged girls who swept crossings, pretty, pathetic-looking organ boys, strapping lasses with saucy eyes who sold flowers—these and various other victims of social inequality had again and again partaken of the hospitality of Gabrielle's house. Nor was there anything in all this of that merely æsthetic benevolence which is only touched by picturesque suffering. It was the suffering itself which won Gabrielle's sympathy, not its attitude or its prettiness. She held society responsible for everything—especially in the days before she had come to trouble herself with any thought as to what this all-neglecting, all-responsible society really was.

These ways were very amusing and even charming to Mrs. Leven for a long time. Gabrielle was so pretty and so graceful; there was such a fresh winningness in her perverse ways of looking at everything; she stuck by her nonsense so bravely; she lectured Albert with such a bewitching gravity, as if she were a Minerva-Mentor heaven-appointed to teach and guide and sometimes even drive him, that Albert's mother found her life greatly brightened by the companionship of this fascinating enthusiast. When Albert fell in love with Gabrielle, his mother was delighted; and even when Gabrielle refused Albert, the mother forgave her and went so far as to admit that she had done right according to her conscience, fully believing all the time that the scruples of conscience would give way, and that her boy would be made happy in the end. But when heavy disappointment fell upon all her hopes, she felt that she was growing to hate the girl. She hated her all the more because Albert would not hear a word that found fault with her. Then the melancholy end came; and she blamed Gabrielle at last for everything that had happened, and felt towards her much as a lady of the middle ages might have felt towards some fair sorceress who had bewitched and betrayed her son.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. ALBERT VANTHORPE.

THE house in which Gabrielle Vanthorpe lived was one of Albert's whims. Almost immediately after he had come of age, and when he still had hopes that Gabrielle would marry him,

he had seen a pretty little house standing in a tiny enclosure of its own, the enclosure being itself enclosed in a corner of one of the parks. It was so surrounded by trees and so embedded in its corner, that one might pass by day after day without suspecting that the little gate led to any dwelling of mortal. Albert was delighted with it, set his heart upon it, succeeded in getting possession of it on a long lease, and had it furnished after his own favourite ideas. It was to be a surprise and a delight to Gabrielle, if things came right; and when there was no possibility of things coming right any more for him in this world, he had made it his express wish that Gabrielle should live in the house after his death. She had settled there now. It soothed her to be always in a place associated with his name; she would, if she might, have made every room in the little house a shrine of his memory. Like the father of whom Pliny tells us, she would have had the cherished image in brass, in marble, in wax, in every manner of substance, if she might. She resolved to keep the anniversary of his death as a day of mourning and solemn fast. Mrs. Leven was mistaken in supposing that she had made no change in her dress when Albert died. She always wore black, but she would not advertise herself as a widow by putting on the preposterous weeds.

In all that was meant as a tribute to his memory there was, it is needless to say, a virtual acknowledgment that that memory might possibly otherwise have faded. At least there was the evidence of regret and something like remorse, because she had not loved him. Gabrielle was determined to keep his memory green with her; the determination itself an all-sufficient proof that she had truly interpreted the feelings of her heart when she came to the conclusion that she could not love him. Now that the bitterness of his death is past, and that every day is softening the force of regret into a tender and sweet emotion, it must be owned that Gabrielle Vanthorpe is not so unhappy as perhaps she ought to have been. Her deepest source of present regret is that her once loving friend, Mrs. Leven, seems to have hardened her heart against her. But Gabrielle is sure this will not last; and she has filled her soul with the determination to prove that she is worthy of that love which used to be like a mother's to her. Gabrielle has vague, magnificent purposes of doing so much good with the means Albert has left her, as to raise a very mound and monument of noble deeds as a tribute to his virtues and to the inspiration she has caught from them. Albert had had a servant who was once butler in his father's house and who

afterwards married, and started a west-end lodging-house, which wholly failed and scattered all his and his wife's earnings to the winds. Gabrielle took up the pair, and put them in charge of the house and of herself as well.

There was one room in the house into which no mere visitor was ever admitted on any pretext. It was Gabrielle's own room, but not sacred to herself. It was a room which Albert had intended to make his own study, and had begun fitting up for the purpose. Every shelf and book he had had put in remained as it was, and Gabrielle had brought from Genoa everything that had been his and stored them as sacred relics in this memorial room. It was on the ground-floor, and was almost darkened by the trees outside; the gloom gave it additional austerity as a chamber consecrated to the memory of one who was no more. If Gabrielle had ventured, she would have asked Mrs. Leven to give her some precious relic of each period of Albert's life, the memorials of each stage of growth and culture and whim and fad he had passed through, in order that this chamber of memory might illustrate his whole career. Over the chimney-piece was a large photograph of the cemetery in which he lay buried and of his grave. One who came and sat in this room even in gaudy summer might have almost fancied himself far away from the tumult of modern life, buried in the seclusion of some lonely demesne, whose rightful owner is dead, and which is a monument rather than a home.

At first the pale and melancholy face of Gabrielle seemed quite in keeping with the room she commonly occupied, but of late it must be owned that activity and youth were sending back the glow of health to the face of the young widow.

With all her eager, earnest ways, some of which ill-natured censors might perhaps have been tempted to describe as flighty, Gabrielle was a great lover at times of quietude and always of beauty. She delighted to surround herself with pretty things, and was made happy in a childlike way by colours and perfumes. She enjoyed the sight of fruits even more than their taste. While waiting to do great good for all who needed a helping hand, she meanwhile loved to adorn her rooms with what might have seemed to others superfluous decoration. She enjoyed profusion, although she could well enough have told her heart to put up with stint if needs were. There was a great deal that must have been fascinating in her present life. Its utter quiet at home, its absolute independence at home and abroad, the sense of sufficiency that it brought to her; perhaps, above all, the prospect of the marvellous good deeds she was to

do, and the faint sound, heard long in advance, of the voices that were to praise her for her good deeds—all these conditions poured a soft, sweet atmosphere around the romantic young woman's yet untried existence. Gabrielle had not many friends, but they were all such as she felt she could trust. They were all, it may as well be said, women. As yet she had not opened her door to any male visitor; Walter Manny Taxal would have applied in vain so far. Her friends were, as Mrs. Leven had remarked, of curiously varied classes of life.

One of her newest friends was Janet Charlton, a married niece of respectable Mrs. Bramble, the housekeeper. There were some fans and other trinkets of curious Oriental make which Albert had brought home for Gabrielle, and which had got broken or otherwise injured here and there; and Gabrielle wanted some artificer of delicate touch and trustworthy skill to whom they might be given for repair, or at least for preservation. Mrs. Bramble told Gabrielle she had a niece married to a man who could do just that sort of thing, and who made a living by it; she did assure Mrs. Vanthorpe ladies of the highest rank came to him, to repair their ornaments for them—things which they wouldn't put into the hands of the first jeweller in town. They were so friendly, some of these ladies; oh, you could not think; why, she had known of countesses going and sitting for two hours together, chatting with Robert Charlton and his wife while he was doing the work they wanted to have done. Gabrielle did not suggest that possibly those great ladies sat there because they did not care to trust their ornaments out of their sight. She only said that she supposed if he could do the work to the satisfaction of such great persons he could satisfy her; and she sent him some jobs of work, beginning with the least precious, until she found that he really had a marvellous hand and could be trusted with anything. The work was sometimes brought back by his wife, and Gabrielle insisted on making her acquaintance. She was all the more impelled to this because Mrs. Bramble suggested in a mysterious way that, although Robert Charlton was a good husband, yet his wife had not always a very happy life of it.

Gabrielle was still more drawn to Janet Charlton when she saw her. First of all, Janet seemed absurdly young for a wife; she looked more like a school girl. This was personally touching to Gabrielle. Next, she was singularly pretty, and even beautiful; and Gabrielle, loving all beautiful things, loved dearly to look upon a beautiful woman. Then, too, Janet seemed so

sweet, and innocent, and tender, so craving for care, and sympathy, and love, that Gabrielle thought it pity of her life if she could do nothing to relieve her of trouble, if trouble she really had. Gabrielle more than once tried gently to get at the young woman's confidence; but either she had failed to touch the right chord, or Janet really did not think that anyone could want to know anything about so insignificant a creature as herself.

Janet had especially beautiful hair; it was almost startling in its golden splendour. It was all gathered up in a great mass on the back of her head, and seemed as if, when let down, it might have clothed her in a robe of gold far finer and more becoming than Lesbia's. One day, when Janet had come to see her, Gabrielle could not keep from breaking out into raptures, to the young woman's blushing and perturbed face, about her glorious hair and her beauty.

'Why does not somebody paint you? Do you know any painters? I wish I were a painter for once; I could make a lovely picture of you. I never saw such hair.'

The young person thus complimented might be supposed to be gratified, but she did not seem so; on the contrary, she appeared rather to wince under the compliments. She faintly murmured, 'Oh, no; please don't say so—please don't.'

'Why, you foolish creature, you don't mean to say that you don't know you are beautiful? Has no one ever told you so? Does your husband never say so? Don't you ever look in the glass?'

The object of this appeal only grew more and more uneasy.

'This is genuine, I do believe,' Gabrielle said, after a moment of bewilderment. 'It is real modesty! Men, I am sure, would not believe in such a thing; and I don't wonder. I should not have believed in it; here is a woman who positively does not like to be told, even by another woman, that she is beautiful!'

'Oh, no, please; it isn't that; it isn't modesty. Oh, no!'

'It isn't modesty?' Gabrielle said, highly puzzled and amused. 'Then what on earth is it, child?'

'It's only because I get into so much trouble by it! Oh, I do so wish I were not good-looking! I should be so happy if I were ugly! I wish I had the small-pox, or that I might cut off all this horrid hair.'

'My dear creature, you are talking sacrilege, simple sacrilege. I should not wonder if the roof fell in—'

The uneasy fair one with golden locks actually glanced up

with sudden fearfulness at the ceiling, apparently in alarm lest it might be going to descend.

Gabrielle saw the glance, and smiled and reassured her.

'No, it won't fall; don't be alarmed; I did not mean that literally. But it sounds like a sin against beauty to hear you talk of cutting off that glorious hair. You would drive an artist wild, if he were to hear you talking in that manner.'

'I don't care,' said the desperate little beauty. 'I am often like to be driven wild myself.'

'But why? What is the mystery? Come and tell me all about it, if it is no secret, and may be told. I have heard of the fatal gift of beauty, to be sure; but I always thought that where it belonged to a woman she was very proud of it, whether it brought fatality or not.'

'They weren't like me,' the golden-haired one murmured; no doubt, having in her mind generally the women whose fatal gift of beauty was nevertheless a source of personal pride. 'Oh no—if they had been they wouldn't have liked it half so well, I can tell them.'

'Can you really? Well, will you tell it to me? I should like to know what the conditions are that ever make a woman wish not to be beautiful.'

'It's because of my husband,' the young woman said timidly, and casting a glance round the room as if fearful that he might be there listening to her revelation.

'Why, is he bad to you? You do not look like that.'

'Oh, no, he is not bad, he is very good; and he is very fond of me, and kind to me in other ways. But he thinks I am too handsome; and he makes me very miserable sometimes.'

'Thinks you too handsome? Would he rather you were not handsome? And if so, why did he marry you? Why didn't he find some ugly woman to suit his peculiar taste?'

'No, it isn't that,' and Janet could not keep from a faint smile. 'But he thinks people look at me, and that I attract attention, and I don't; oh, goodness knows, I don't want to—if he only knew. No one comes near the place but he worries me and insists on my going to hide; or says they are coming after me, and that they all admire me, and they don't, I do declare they don't; half of them never notice me, or think about me—why should they? I wish I never saw anyone; he and I could be very happy together if we never saw anybody.'

Gabrielle thought for a little. The distress of the poor young woman was evidently genuine; and, for all the whimsicality of its cause, was very touching.

'Well, you are a beautiful young woman, that is certain. But I may speak quite frankly to you, as you have such good cause not to be too vain of your charms; and I must say that I think you would pass off quietly enough only for all that mass of lovely hair. You would be admired always by people who looked closely at you; but this is a busy age, and people in general don't give themselves much trouble about looking for beauty. I fancy no woman could go about with hair like that without being noticed; it is a challenge to all the world to stop and look. Now, if your husband would just let you cut that hair off close, and cover whatever had to be left neatly up in a little cap, you would not draw half the attention on you, and then you and he might be very happy.'

'Oh, but he wouldn't listen to it; he wouldn't hear a word of the kind. He admires my hair awfully; I dare not touch it—to cut any of it off, I mean.'

'I thought as much. That is the way with your self-tormentor always. There is a sure way of relief at hand, but he won't use it. Well, my poor child, yours is rather a hard case, and I should like to help you. I'll go and talk to your husband; he must be a man who can be talked to and argued with.'

'You go and talk to my husband?'

'Yes, child; why not? You won't be jealous?'

'Oh, no;' and Janet smiled a really bright and cheerful smile that it did good to Gabrielle to see.

'Very well; *he* can't be jealous. I am not a handsome young man drawn by your golden hair. Yes, I'll go and talk to your husband, and see if I can't bring him to reason.'

'But if he knew that I had been telling, it would seem like complaining of him perhaps, and he might be angry.'

'Set your mind at rest, child; I'll not betray you. I will talk to him and get him to betray himself, and then I shall have an opportunity of giving him what people call a piece of my mind. Now we must arrange all this; I must come at a time when I shall be sure to see him, so that we may begin the acquaintance at once. It may take some time, you know, before my advice comes to have any effect. But it shall have effect in the end; for I am quite determined that something shall be done for you, and for him too. I can tell you I am not by any means without a certain sort of sympathy for him. It is something to have even an exaggerated emotion of love in such an age as this.'

'Yes, I suppose it is,' Mrs. Charlton said rather ruefully;

‘I suppose I ought to look at it in that light, and I do sometimes; but you have no idea how very, very trying it is; and to think how happy we might be, we two, only for this.’

There was something in this simple utterance which brought tears into the eyes of Gabrielle, she could not tell exactly why.

‘You must not mind that too much,’ she said quickly. ‘There are worse things to be endured in life than being thought too much of by one’s husband. But I hope we shall bring him to reason. Tell me—there are other people who live in the same house with you; other lodgers, I mean?’

Yes, there were several, Janet said. Were there any of these about whom her husband complained in any way? Well, yes; there was one young man who lived on the lower floor; but he never exchanged a word with her, except the most commonplace civilities, such as he would offer to anyone else; and her husband liked him very well, and was very glad to talk to him sometimes; he was a very nice gentleman.

Now, Gabrielle had some trifling weaknesses of character as well as some larger defects, and one of her weaknesses was that she was apt to be annoyed when persons of a class somewhat beneath her own, as she fancied, allowed themselves to describe their personal friends and associates as gentlemen and ladies. What does a man want with being called a gentleman, she was wont to argue, if he has not been brought up in the ways and with the education of the class who are called gentlemen? So long as he is a good and true man, that ought to be enough for him. If I—thus she would reason—were an intelligent man of the humbler class I should no more crave to be called a gentleman than to be called a bishop.

‘A gentleman?’ she asked with some little emphasis. ‘Do you really mean a gentleman, Mrs. Charlton, or simply a respectable and agreeable man?’

‘Oh, no; he is a real gentleman; at least, the people always say so. He looks like one, certainly.’

Gabrielle did not ask how it was that a gentleman came to live in the same place with Mrs. Charlton and her husband, partly because such a question would put very broadly the fact that she did not consider Mr. Charlton to be a gentleman, and partly because she reflected in time that even a true gentleman may come to be poor and hide himself in obscurity in London. But it always irritated her when people had not the courage to stand by their own class.

‘Well, Mrs. Charlton, I shall be delighted to come and see you whenever you allow me; and I’ll do my best to bring your

husband to reason. You and he ought to be very happy. You must give me a little time, you know, to make your husband's acquaintance, and see what sort of man he is, and how one can best approach him. I suppose every man has ways and peculiarities of his own.'

'I suppose so,' the mild Mrs. Charlton said, willing to accept an opinion from any higher intelligence, although she was just on the verge of giving it as her conviction that all men were alike. It might have afforded a somewhat curious subject of contemplation to the student of human self-conceit, to find these two young women thus gravely laying down the law on the general character and moral constitution of man.

Janet Charlton was quite prepared to take her views from one who not only sympathised with her troubles, but was confident she could help her out of them; and she went homeward that evening almost indifferent to the curious or admiring glances which the passing stranger might throw after her. In all ordinary cases there was one terror which specially haunted the poor little beauty's mind. Suppose some evening, when she was returning home, she should be made the subject of unusually pertinacious attentions on the part of some admiring stranger; suppose he persisted in following her; and suppose just about that time her husband happened to be in the street and saw her? He would be sure to think that she was encouraging the stranger's admiration; and what would become of her? On the other hand, how was she to act? She had often thought the situation over, and could not see her way to any safe and satisfactory course of proceeding. Suppose she were to remonstrate with the seeming admirer, and he were to reply that he had never been thinking of her at all; that he walked that way because his business led him thither, and that he presumed the streets were as free to him as to her? What was she to do then? She should only have made herself ridiculous for nothing. Then, besides, if her husband were to come up at that particular moment he would be sure to regard her well-meant efforts as only an artful device for the purpose of drawing on herself the attention and admiration of some stranger who would otherwise have passed unheeding.

But this evening she was walking home with a heart free from such cares. She was not thinking of passing strangers or their admiration; they might admire or not, for all she cared; and if her husband had appeared in sight she would have hailed his coming with unmixed joy. The sweet kindly ways of the new friend she had just left filled her with delight. The firm,

decisive manner of Mrs. Vanthorpe gave her entire confidence; such a lady, she thought—so sweet, so kind, so gracious, and so commanding, could do anything. She thought, too, of the delight it would give her husband if so splendid a lady as that were to come and talk with him in a friendly way; talk to him about books and the newspapers, and politics and wars, and things that she, his ignorant little wife, knew nothing about. It would be a great thing too that she, the ignorant little wife, had been the means of introducing Robert to this charming lady. That would be some pride for her, and make her husband think more of her; more of her good sense, that is, for she was sick of hearing about her beauty. It occurred to Janet, too, with a feeling of genuine satisfaction, that the lady was a great deal handsomer than she—oh, if one don't mind the hair, even so much handsomer; and then Robert might get to understand that a woman can be handsome without all the world running after her, and without any occasion for her to be tormented to death by her lawful guardians, or treated as if she ought to be kept in a glass case. Indeed, the world began to look very bright this evening to handsome golden-haired Janet. She found herself humming a tune as she walked on.

Her way was not short. It lay through one of the parks. The evening was bright and soft, and the sight of the grass and the sun and the sky and the trees sent a thrill half of delight half of pain through Janet's heart. There came back upon her the memories of the bright time when she lived in the country, and had the trees and the flowers always around her, and took a deep interest in the changes of the seasons, and used to think it delightful to go to the church on Sunday; to cross the fields and get to the church with the huge tree in front of the gate. It was in that church she first saw Robert; and there she was married. She remembered not without a pang that she then thought it a glorious thing to go to live in London, which shone upon her imagination as a city of gold and marble, of parks and palaces. She was very loyal to her new life, and would not have admitted even to herself that she was not perfectly happy with her husband; at least, that she would not be perfectly happy if he would only trouble himself and her less about her beauty and about what people thought of her. But still the London of which she had daily experience was certainly a very different place from the London in which she was once so proud to think that she was going to live. Just at this moment, however, as she is crossing the park, what with her new friend and her hope of Robert's being talked into reason,

and the fine evening, and the grass and the trees, the London that she sees around her does somehow begin to look like the city of palaces and parks.

Her happiness was destined to a slight disturbance, for just at that moment a cheery voice behind her was heard :

‘ Good evening, Mrs. Charlton; one does not often see you out in this quarter. I am glad to have met you—or rather, I should say, to have overtaken you, for I have not met you. Do you remember the story about the slow walker and the snail ? ’

Poor Janet was not in a condition to remember that or any other story at the moment. She looked up alarmed and bewildered into the face of the young man who, as yet wholly unconscious of the emotion his presence was creating, was walking by her side and talking all the time. He was a tall young man, slight but strong, with something like the appearance of one who has not yet quite done growing—such promise did his chest and shoulders give when compared with the general slightness of his figure. He had a face with fine outlines, and a pair of sparkling dark eyes.

All Janet could say at first was, ‘ Oh, Mr. Fielding ! ’ and then—‘ you did so frighten me ! ’

‘ Frighten you ?—I’m sure I am very sorry ; I didn’t mean to frighten you. Are you going homeward ? I am. May I walk with you ? Shall I carry your basket for you ? ’

For Janet was bearing a basket in which she had some little delicacies bought for her husband’s tea.

‘ Oh, no, thank you,’ she said in an alarmed tone. ‘ I had rather walk alone, please. I am not sure ; I don’t think I am going home ; at least, I think I am going the other way.’

‘ What, back again—the way you were coming ? ’

‘ I don’t know if I have not forgotten something ; I have been to call upon a lady ; perhaps I had better go back.’

‘ Come, why not say at once you don’t want to walk with me ? ’ he asked in a tone of perfect good-humour. ‘ I am not in the least offended ; I suppose I ought not to have offered my companionship ; but really one forgets the proprieties sometimes. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Charlton ; good evening. You need not turn back, for I shall get on a good deal faster than you are likely to do.’ He raised his hat to her, and was going on.

‘ But I am afraid you will think me rude, Mr. Fielding,’ she said timidly ; ‘ and I don’t mean to be, indeed. And I am sure you only meant to be kind.’

‘ Really, I don’t think I did, Mrs. Charlton, except to myself. I thought you were going my way, and I should like

to have your company ; I get a good deal of my own society, and I get tired of it now and then.'

'I am sure I should be delighted,' Janet stammered out, 'and you are so kind to say so—to say you would like it; but I don't suppose, perhaps—it might not be quite—oh, really, I don't know, Mr. Fielding; but I am very much obliged to you; and I want you not to think that I have been rude.'

She smiled with a half-alarmed eagerness that might perhaps have seemed an invitation to Mr. Fielding to remain in her company, but which was certainly not so intended by her, and was not so interpreted by him. He understood perfectly well what she meant; he could see without any trouble to his penetration that she was a kindly little modest creature, who for some reason or other thought she was bound to keep men at a severe distance. So he only said a word or two to assure her that he did not feel offended, and his tall slight figure was very soon, at his rate of walking, a speck in the dim distance.

Mrs. Charlton was troubled by the meeting. She was afraid that some one might have seen her who would tell Robert; she was greatly afraid that she had been rude, and had offended her well-meaning acquaintance; and again, she was afraid she had betrayed her fears so far as to let him guess that her husband was foolish and jealous. As she walked along, she wondered to herself again and again why women—at least, why married women—liked to be thought handsome. 'If I were not thought handsome by Robert, or anybody,' she kept saying to herself, 'how friendly I might be with everyone, and how happy I might be!' Her mind was a good deal occupied too by the prospect of the visit she was to have from Mrs. Vanthorpe. It was to be, moreover, not a visit but a series of visits. Mrs. Vanthorpe had talked of deliberately making Robert Charlton's acquaintance; and that would take time and would involve a coming again and again. It was very likely too that Mrs. Vanthorpe would ask Robert and herself to tea some evening; and then if Robert could only be persuaded to put aside his odd independent ways for once, and to accept the lady's invitation, how delightful it would be; how charming to have Robert show how clever he was, and what books he had read; and he would do so when he was at his ease, which he was sure to be very soon with so charming a lady. What a very young lady she was—what a young widow. Why, she did not look more than twenty! How Robert would admire her; and surely Mrs. Vanthorpe could not help liking Robert. The whole prospect was delightful. One little cloud was on it;

Mrs. Charlton hoped somehow that the young man she had just met would not happen to be anywhere in the way when the lady came. Gabrielle's doubt as to whether he was really a gentleman pressed upon the little woman's mind. 'Perhaps he isn't a gentleman,' she thought; 'and if he isn't, I hope she won't see him at all.'

One question came up to Janet's mind many times during the next day or two. Would Mrs. Vanthorpe come in her carriage? Would the carriage have one horse or two? Would the carriage stop in the square out of which ran the narrow street in which the Charltons lived, or would it actually drive up to the very door? Janet watched with unflagging attention for the sound of carriage wheels for two days, and after all did not know when her visitor was actually at the door. For Gabrielle, who was fond of walking and of seeing the streets, had merely set out on foot the third afternoon following Janet's visit, and walked briskly across the park and through a maze of streets, only stopping now and then to soothe crying children, and reason with wrangling or cat-persecuting urchins. At length she reached the square.

It was a very quiet, dull, decaying, grass-grown old square, somewhere in the region of the Foundling Hospital. Very few private houses were in the square; it was given up to charitable institutions and queer old libraries founded by long-forgotten oddities into whose awful cells no one ever seemed to enter. There were dispensaries, and little hospitals, and asylums for aged respectabilities there; but no mortal had ever seen a patient entering or borne into one of them, or a decayed respectability looking out of window or taking an airing in the sun. Glancing into one of the libraries, you could not fancy any modern reader studying there. One might, perhaps, form a conception of the founder of the institution himself, in neat black small-clothes and shiny knee-buckles, and rigid, decorous pigtail, taking some of the books down from their mouldering shelves and lovingly whisking the dust from their snuff-coloured leaves, and timidly making himself air when the rattle of a chanco cab below suggested the possibility of a knock at the door and a visitor from the living world outside.

Perhaps Gabrielle Vanthorpe was nursing some fancy of this kind as she walked round the old square in search of the little street to which she was bound. Gabrielle was fanciful enough usually, and, whenever she saw any peculiar-looking house, immediately fitted it up with some appropriate story. Because of some fancy or other, she stopped a moment when

she came to the opening of the street she was seeking, and satiated to go down. It was dark and narrow; it had one long row of tall, heavy, old-fashioned decaying houses; the other side was only a huge wall, bounding one of the mysterious institutions already mentioned. There was no egress at the other end of the street; a wall stopped it up. The whole place looked mournful and forbidding to Gabrielle; it seemed to her for the moment that if she went down there something evil must come of it. She got over this feeling in a moment, however, and went down the street until she came to the house she was seeking. It was tall, grey, and melancholy. A mournful memory of decayed respectability seemed to cloud its high flight of crumbling steps.

Gabrielle knocked and rang again and again. She did not understand the economy of the number of little bell-handles which she saw at the side of the door, and rang the first, therefore, that came to her hand. At last the door opened, and a young man stood before her, who began by saying—

‘I am sorry you have been kept so long. I heard the bell ring ever so many times; and at last it dawned upon me that somebody whom it concerned must be out, and that nobody whom it did not concern would take any trouble, and so I thought I had better come to the rescue.’

‘Do you know if Mrs. Charlton is at home?’ Gabrielle asked, when he had come to the end of his rapid little speech.

‘I don’t know, I’m sure. Very likely she is. Will you come in for a moment, and I’ll ring her bell for you? That’s her bell, you see—second floor front.’

‘Oh, that’s her bell,’ Gabrielle said, rather amused by his quick cheery way. ‘I did not know.’

‘Of course not; how could you know? You have never been here before, I suppose?’

‘No; I have never been here before.’

‘Your estate is the more gracious, I can assure you. Now, you see, I have rung Mrs. Charlton’s bell, and she will be here in a moment. Won’t you sit down? I’ll bring you a chair from my room. It’s not any trouble, not the least.’

‘Thank you—no,’ said Gabrielle. ‘It is hardly worth while; I think I hear Mrs. Charlton coming.’

Gabrielle put on all the dignity she could call up on the instant, considering that she was, as we have said, rather amused by the eager courtesy of her new acquaintance, and was wondering within herself whether he was not about to ask her to take a seat in his room. At that moment Janet Charl-

ton come rustling down the stairs. She blushed and grew confused when she saw Mrs. Vanthorpe and the lodger apparently in friendly conversation. Very pretty and winning she looked in her embarrassment.

'Oh, Mrs. Charlton,' the young man said before she had time to put in a word, 'here is a lady to see you. She might have been there long enough, I fancy, if I had not happened to observe that somebody was ringing at the bell, and that nothing was coming of it. There never was such a house as this. I believe there are servants, but what do they do, Mrs. Charlton—what do they do?'

'I am sure I am greatly obliged to you,' said the bewildered Janet. 'I am so sorry, Mrs. Vanthorpe, to have kept you waiting. Will you be kind enough to come upstairs, Madame?' She was almost overwhelmed at the thought of such a lady as Mrs. Vanthorpe being kept waiting in such a way, and was thinking to herself, 'She will never come here again after all this.'

'Vanthorpe!' the young man suddenly asked, stopping short in the midst of the parting bow he was making. 'Excuse me—did you say Vanthorpe?'

'My name is Vanthorpe,' Gabrielle answered gravely.

'Miss Vanthorpe?'

'I am Mrs. Vanthorpe,' Gabrielle said. 'Shall we go upstairs, Mrs. Charlton? Pray don't make any apologies. I was not long waiting, and it was only my own mistake that caused any delay.'

She cut short anything the young man might have to say by a very chilling bow as she followed the confused and depressed Janet up the narrow staircase to the second floor. On their way up Janet contrived to cast back at the young man one wondering, reproachful glance that seemed to say, 'Now you have done it. Oh, how could you be so odd?'

The lodger only raised his eyebrows and smiled at poor Janet wholly unabashed. He stood for a moment on the threshold of his own room as if thinking over some question which he hoped to settle in a moment.

'Rather a rude young woman,' he suddenly said aloud to himself. 'I wonder if her husband, too, is jealous, and goes wild if anybody speaks to her.'

CHAPTER IV.

THE LODGERS IN BOLINGBROKE PLACE.

GABRIELLE followed Mrs. Charlton up the stairs ; but for the moment she was not thinking either of Janet or of her own purpose in coming to Janet's house. She was strangely impressed by the demeanour and the words of the odd young man she had seen on the staircase, and whom she at once identified in her own mind with the 'real gentleman' whom Janet had described to her, and concerning whom Mr. Charlton might possibly have been disposed to make himself foolishly uneasy. He seemed a gentleman, certainly, Gabrielle thought, although there was something abrupt and *sans gêne* in his manner that she did not like. But it was not his abruptness that impressed her especially ; it was the manner in which he had gone over her name as if it affected him with some strange associations. Those who follow Gabrielle Vanthorpe's story will not be long in finding out that she was a young woman of a very lively imagination, marvellously ready to form impressions, jump to conclusions, and endow the fantasies of her own mind with flesh-and-blood reality. Even as she mounted the stairs to Janet's room, she was already wondering whether it might not be possible that the destinies had, at the very outset of her career of active beneficence, thrown her on the track of a discovery which was very near her heart, but had seemed far away from her hopes.

She was somewhat surprised when she saw Mr. Charlton. He was quite unlike what she had expected to see. This was a weakness on her part. She ought to have known that he would be unlike what she naturally expected to see. Everybody ought by this time to have mastered the physiological truth that the furious fanatic is certain to have the gentlest and sweetest manners ; that the uncompromising atheist is one whose whole appearance suggests only devotional fervour ; that the remorseless tyrant will have the complexion, the curls, and the hands of a girl ; and so forth. Gabrielle expected, when she heard of Mr. Charlton's jealousy and his masterful love, to see a tall powerful man, with the approved or regulation tawny beard, and all the rest of the gigantic and tyrannical accessories ; but having found this image naturally present itself, she ought to have known that the real man would be the very

opposite of all this. So, of course, it proved. Robert Charlton was a small, slender, delicate-looking man, with long, thin fingers, such as an Asiatic worker in ivory might have; a dark, silky beard, the very silkiness of which suggested a wasted or over-refined physical constitution. He was sitting in the window engaged at some work upon a fan when Gabrielle entered, and was trying to catch all the sunlight that allowed itself to take the trouble of piercing its way into Bolingbroke Place. He seemed nervous to the point of personal distress when Gabrielle entered, and while he was presented to her by his wife. He gave Gabrielle a chair, however, with a certain graceful shyness, and then he stood up as if wondering what was to come next. Janet sat on a sofa, and seemed as if she were not expected to make any part of the social interview. This would have been a little embarrassing to most visitors, but it did not affect Gabrielle in the least.

'You are a wonderful worker, Mr. Charlton,' she said by way of a beginning; 'I never saw such delicate manipulation as yours.'

The tone of her voice had a friendly ring about it. She seemed above all things sympathetic, to begin with.

'I am glad you think so,' Robert answered hesitatingly; 'some people don't understand the difficulty; I like to meet with one who does. It is the only thing I can do.'

'Oh, now, there's a story!' Janet broke in, roused from her quiescence by his disparagement of himself—a thing she never could stand. 'Indeed it is not true, Mrs. Vanthorpe, not a word; although he always goes on that way. He can do ever so many things; he could do anything he tried to, I am sure.'

Gabrielle turned to her in admiration; the little woman was looking so lovely in the fervour of her excitement.

'I am sure he can do many things,' Gabrielle said; 'I see you have hands that ought to be able to do anything in the way of artistic work, Mr. Charlton: hands as slender and delicate as a girl's; but strong, I dare say, as a girl's can't be.'

Charlton looked quickly at his hands, with an embarrassed but not at all a displeased air, and turned off attention by saying to his wife: 'Janet, I am sure this lady——'

'Mrs. Vanthorpe,' said Gabrielle, smiling.

'Mrs. Vanthorpe would like a cup of tea.'

Of course Gabrielle took care to say that she wished for a cup of tea above-all things.

'You will excuse me, Mrs. Vanthorpe, I hope,' Robert went

on, brightening up a little, 'if I seemed to forget your name. Of course I knew well enough that it was for Mrs. Vanthorpe I was doing the work; but when I saw you I never thought you were the lady. You look too young to be a married lady. I thought you were Miss Vanthorpe, perhaps, or some other relation of the lady I was working for.'

'I am not so young as your wife, I think,' Gabrielle said; 'yet she is Mrs. Charlton.'

'Yes, that is quite true,' he answered; 'but then——' and he stopped and became embarrassed; for he knew that the Mrs. Vanthorpe he was working for was a widow, and he was on the verge of saying something of the kind. His habitually pale face grew almost red at the thought of what he had so nearly uttered.

Gabrielle was for a moment a little embarrassed too, but she recovered herself in the resolve to set him at his ease.

'Your wife is a beautiful woman—or girl, I ought to call her,' she said. Janet was now in another room, bustling about in the preparation of the tea. 'I think I never saw such lovely hair. You must be very proud of her.'

'She is very beautiful,' he said uneasily, and his face colouring once more. 'She is too handsome for the kind of life we have to lead; I only hope she will not come to think so.'

'Oh, she never will,' said Gabrielle decisively. 'She is not at all like that.' Gabrielle spoke as confidently as if she had known Janet from her earliest infancy. 'She does not seem to value her own beauty in the least, except as it pleases you. She appears to me to be a model wife, and I am sure you appreciate her, Mr. Charlton.'

'I do appreciate her, I do,' he said, as if in a tone of self-remonstrance; 'I never like to find fault with her; but what kind of life is this for a woman so pretty as she? She has to go about here on errands for me, with my work and that, like any common servant. People may talk to her, and tell her she is too handsome for that sort of thing.'

'She is much too sensible and much too fond of you to care for any such stuff. You must not think we women are all fools, Mr. Charlton.'

'She should be a fool,' he said, shaking his head, 'if she thought the kind of life she leads here was a pleasant one, or fit for a woman like her. It is all very well to talk wisely on the matter; but there are people enough about to tell her so, and fill her mind with the thought.'

'You want faith in her,' Gabrielle said, almost angry with him for his perversity. 'I don't think you deserve so fond a wife, Mr. Charlton.'

'Exactly,' he answered, with an uneasy smile. 'That is just what people will tell her, I dare say; that I am unworthy of her, and all that sort of thing. It does affect a woman's mind, however well-inclined she may be.'

Janet entered the room again, and cut short the conversation. She was handing Gabrielle a cup of tea, when a tap was heard at the door. Charlton looked towards his wife uneasily.

'It's Mr. Lefussis, dear,' Janet said. 'Mrs. Vanthorpe won't care to be disturbed.'

'Oh, he can't come in now,' Robert said. 'He is a man who lodges here; not a bad fellow, but a nuisance sometimes.'

Gabrielle fancied it must be the young man she had seen, and she was anxious for an opportunity of seeing him again.

'Don't send him away for me, please,' she said. 'I must not put you out of your usual ways. Mrs. Charlton promised me that you were not to be interfered with by me.'

Meanwhile the visitor who had tapped, and indeed tapped again without getting any answer while this discussion was going on, now gently opened the door, and was entering. When he saw a strange lady, he began a sort of apology, but made no attempt to withdraw. He was a tall lean man, some fifty years of age or thereabouts, wearing a shabby brown waterproof coat, which did not seem to cover any undercoat. He wore a stiff rigid old-fashioned stock of forgotten mould round his neck, and his shirt-collar suggested the days of the first Reform Bill. He had stiff beaver gloves, one of which was carried on, the other in, a hand. He was apparently the wreck of a gentleman; a hulk that had been much wasted and battered by adverse wind and weather. His thin hair and whiskers had that dusty grey on their edges which always suggests what Henry of Navarre called the wind of adversity blowing in the face. It showed curiously unlike the soft comfortable grey that speaks of life to the latest well enjoyed, and of dinners always sure to come at the right time.

'Beg pardon, I am sure,' the visitor said; 'I hope I may come in just for a moment. I am not going to make any stay. I trust the lady will excuse me.'

'Mr. Lefussis, madam,' said Janet, doing the honours not very willingly. 'A—a friend of Robert's and mine.'

Mr. Lefussis made a grand bow, with a wave of the arm that suggested the necessity of a three-cornered hat to render

the effect of the gesture complete. Gabrielle acknowledged the salutation with external graciousness and internal wonder.

'I thought you would like to know, Charlton,' he said grandly. 'I have been in town; in the Whitehall region, you know, F. O. in fact. I have had a long chat with Lord Bosworth, and I know all that's going to be done. The German ambassador came in before I left, and Bosworth went over a good deal of it for him again; but not all, not quite all, of course.'

Some one ought to have said something, apparently, for Mr. Lefussis paused a moment. But Charlton sat with his eyes fixed on his own slender hands, and made no observation. Janet never pretended to have anything to say where lords and ambassadors and such-like personages were the subject of conversation; and Gabrielle did not feel it incumbent on her to do or say anything.

'Things are looking very bad,' Mr. Lefussis went on, when he found that he had as yet made no great impression; 'I don't well know, indeed, how they could by any possibility be much worse. If some step be not taken to hold this government back from the mad course they are pursuing, we shall have all Europe in war in less than a month.'

'Good gracious!' exclaimed Janet, roused into attention by this appalling prospect. 'Can nothing be done, Mr. Lefussis?'

'Bosworth can do nothing,' he said decisively; and now addressing himself to Janet, as she alone appeared to have given proper attention to his story. 'He sees it all as plainly as I do; but he can do nothing. What could he do, you see? It isn't for him, Mrs. Charlton.'

'Oh, isn't it?' asked Janet, much perplexed; 'what a pity! Isn't there anybody who can do anything?'

'Yes,' he answered with dignity; 'I hope I can do something. I mean to try. Leven can do something; Taxal can do something, in his small way, of course, in his small way. We can hold meetings; I am going at once to Taxal and to Leven.'

The names gave Gabrielle a chance of coming into the conversation which she was rather glad of, for it was clear that Charlton would not enter into it, and poor Janet was fast breaking down, and Mr. Lefussis would not go away.

'Is "Leven" Major Leven, may I ask? Do you know Major Leven?'

'Certainly, madam, certainly. I knew Leven in Demerara

—let me see—when was it? In '52 or '55; I am really not quite certain which. You know Major Leven, madam?’

‘Major Leven is a very old friend of mine, and a very dear friend,’ Gabrielle answered, feeling her sentiments towards Mr. Lefussis grow warmer and deeper because of his intimacy with
.. Major Leven.

‘Indeed!’ Lefussis eagerly said, and his eyes sparkled with unspeakable satisfaction. ‘Then I tell you what it is, Mrs. Charlton, my coming in to tell this to your husband is one of the most remarkable illustrations of the working of Providence in our human affairs that you can well imagine. I fancy Charlton is inclined to be a little of a sceptic now and then; but I hope even he won’t quite disregard the meaning of what I am going to say.’

Charlton looked up for a moment and nodded, but said nothing. Gabrielle was now quite bewildered.

‘Look here,’ Lefussis went eagerly on; ‘I came in to see your husband, Mrs. Charlton, never dreaming that I was to have the happiness and the honour of an introduction to this lady; and even when I had that happiness and that honour, never dreaming that in her I was to see a valued friend of Major Leven. Is there nothing providential in this? Why, this lady has only to sit down at Charlton’s desk there and write me a letter of introduction to Major Leven, and it may be that Europe is saved from a war.’

‘I thought you said you knew this gentleman?’ Charlton interposed, looking suddenly up.

‘So I do, my dear fellow, so I do; at least, I did, you know, in Demerara, and other places too; but men forget each other. I haven’t been to dine with Leven this long time; and I never see him at the club now; I believe he has got married or something of the sort; but if this lady would just be kind enough to give me a line of introduction, it might perhaps be the means of rousing him to a deeper interest; and she might hereafter claim to have had her share in saving England from a disgraceful war.’

Poor Janet interchanged glances of agony with her husband. This was too bad; Mrs. Vanthorpe seemed destined to be tormented by all their fellow-lodgers in turn. Now surely after this she would never come again.

‘I should be delighted to bear my share in saving England from so great a calamity,’ Gabrielle said gravely; ‘but I fear I ought not to give any introduction to Major Leven just now. I have some good reason for not writing to him at present.’

‘Now that is rather a pity,’ the unabashed Lefussis said.

'You see, it would be such an advantage, and might do so much good; but of course if you can't, why there's an end. Might I even mention your name to Leven?—as a friend of my friends here, you know.'

'Oh, but please, Mr. Lefussis,' said Janet, in a low deprecating tone, 'don't make a mistake. Robert and I are not so presumptuous as to call ourselves friends of this lady.'

'That lady's face,' Lefussis decisively affirmed, 'proclaims her a friend of the whole human race. I ought to understand something of faces, and I can see that. I hope the lady will excuse me if I seem somewhat forward and pressing; it is in a great cause—a great cause; and there is no time to be lost. I'll go and talk to Fielding; Fielding sometimes has suggestions to give; and in any case I must see Leven and Taxal. Good evening, madam; good evening, Mrs. Charlton; good evening, Charlton. I thought you would like to know how things were going, and so I looked in.'

'Now, who is he?' Gabrielle asked in much curiosity after Mr. Lefussis had gone.

'He is a fool, madam,' said Charlton—'excuse me if I use strong language—an idiot who is made happy in his poverty and his failure by telling himself and everyone he can get to listen that he is hand and glove with every great person—'

'Oh, Robert,' his wife interposed, 'I am sure poor Mr. Lefussis is very kind and friendly, and he means everything well. It was very wrong in him to make such a request of Mrs. Vanthorpe, and I shall tell him so; but he never meant to be rude, Mrs. Vanthorpe, he never did, indeed.'

'He was not rude,' Gabrielle said; 'he was very polite, and I feel interested in him; but I am anxious to know whether he deceives himself, or is trying to deceive other people?'

'He deceives himself,' Charlton said; 'he is not conscious of contradicting himself, or making up stories, or being an idiot. Whatever he likes to believe, he imagines; and he is happy for the time. I believe he is a gentleman, and I believe he had prospects once; and now he has come to live in this place and to have Janet and me for friends.'

'Is he poor?' asked Gabrielle.

'Poor as a church mouse,' Charlton answered. 'In fact, I don't know what helives on; Janet and I are rich in comparison. But I presume he thinks he patronises us because we never belonged to the class that has thrown him off.'

'I should like to do something for him, if I could,' Gabrielle said quietly.

'You may do anything you like for him, madam,' Charlton

said, with an angry flush crossing his face, but only seeming to touch its surface as one sometimes sees a sunset ray fall on a little frozen pool. 'You may do anything you like for him, but I beg you will not think of doing anything for me. I want nothing; Janet and I want nothing from anybody. I am not a gentleman, she is not a lady; I am ready to work for ladies and gentlemen, but I don't want patronage, and I don't want help.' He did not look at Gabrielle all the time, but kept uneasily moving up and down the room and rubbing his hands.

'Oh, Robert, Robert,' his wife entreated; 'how can you go on in such a way? I am sure Mrs. Vanthorpe never meant——'

Gabrielle was neither alarmed nor offended. She took this outbreak with perfect composure; indeed, it interested her far more than ordinary conversation would have done.

'Your husband is quite right, child,' she said quietly to Janet. 'I like him the better for his independence. But when I think of intruding my patronage it will be quite time, Mr. Charlton, to resent it, will it not? I was only thinking, when I spoke of serving your friend here, whether I might really venture to give him a letter to Major Leven—my doubt was on family reasons only. I am glad to know your wife, and I like her very much. I shall be glad to know you if you will allow me.'

Charlton seemed a little ashamed of his outburst, and Gabrielle turned the conversation presently on books and on art, of which she found that Charlton knew a good deal in the scrappy dogmatic way common to 'self-educated' persons, as the phrase is. He had many fresh ideas, and she drew him artfully into talk until he became much delighted with himself and with her, and quite eloquent in the end. Gabrielle did not think she could safely approach the question of Janet's beauty and his jealous humours that time. She would come again, she thought, and accomplish that part of her mission; the first thing was to win Charlton's confidence in herself. That she did her best to accomplish at once. So far did she get, that before she had left he promised to come with his wife to see Gabrielle at her house. Gabrielle was as proud of having conquered thus far, and tamed his fierce independence, as if she were a commander who had succeeded in capturing some strong position at the beginning of a battle. Her goodness and her good opinion of her own skill were gratified alike.

Gabrielle was about to go. She had ordered her little carriage to come for her, and it had now been some time waiting. She had lingered a good deal, not altogether without

a hope that the young man she had seen at the door might come in, and that she might have an opportunity of seeing what he was like. She had made up her mind that there was something mysterious about this young man, and about the wonder which he had expressed when he heard her name.

'What is the name of your other fellow-lodger?' she asked carelessly. 'The young man who was at the door when you came down to-day, Mrs. Charlton—the young man who let me in?'

'Was *he* there?' Charlton asked of his wife. 'You didn't tell me that.'

'He opened the door for me very politely,' said Gabrielle. 'Mrs. Charlton was not there just then.'

'His name is Fielding,' Robert said. 'I don't know very well who he is; he thinks a good deal of himself, I fancy; I wish he would mind his own affairs a little more. He seems a clever sort of fellow, but rather eccentric.'

Gabrielle was gratified to hear that he was eccentric. So far as that went, it fitted in with the little speculation in which she had already been indulging her active fancy.

She would not hear of Robert Charlton's coming to show her downstairs; his time was far too valuable, she said, to be wasted in ceremonial. Mrs. Charlton would light her down, and she would not have anyone else. She went down the dark stairs with Janet, smiling and nodding a good-bye to Robert as she looked back. Then she leaned upon Janet's arm in the friendliest fashion, and told her in a whisper that she hoped to accomplish all for her yet in bringing her husband to reason: and she put Janet into a very bewilderment of pride and delight. Just as they came to the bottom of the stairs a door on the left opened, and Mr. Lefussis and Fielding came out together. Gabrielle graciously bowed to both. Lefussis at once insisted on opening her carriage door for her, which he did with the air of a man who still believes that in carriages sit his natural companions. Fielding remained behind and talked to Janet.

Gabrielle somewhat relaxed towards Lefussis.

'Perhaps I might be able to do something in the way of introducing you to Major Leven,' she said. 'If you were to call on me, Mr. Lefussis, the day after to-morrow, perhaps I might have thought of some way; and I should like to bear my part in saving England from destruction.'

'What part more worthy of a noble-hearted English lady?' the delighted Lefussis said, taking her words quite seriously.

'I shall esteem it the highest honour to be allowed to wait upon you after to-morrow or any day.'

Gabrielle gave him her address, and left him in a condition of exalted happiness. Surely never woman had in a few minutes—an hour or so—made more admirers with honester intention. Janet and Lefussis both remained a moment or two on the door-step to sound her praises; both agreed that so charming, so delightful, so kind, so unaffected, so altogether noble a young woman, was never seen before. Poor Lefussis saw himself once more a welcome visitor in those West-end drawing-rooms from which he had for some little time been sadly absent. Janet saw a peaceful happy home opening up for her as the result of this almost angelic visitation. As for Mr. Fielding, he agreed in all that was said about Gabrielle's beauty and grace of appearance; but he entered a protest as regarded her manners, which he still professed to consider rude. His two companions, however, raised indignant protest, and he gave up the contest, and went back to his room, wondering much within himself as to who the young and handsome woman could be who bore the name of Mrs. Vanthorpe.

'Robert, dear, is she not delightful?' Janet asked, as she burst in upon her husband.

He raised his head from some piece of work he seemed to be bending over earnestly, but he did not look at Janet.

'Who is delightful, Janet?'

'Oh, Mrs. Vanthorpe, of course. Is she not charming?'

'She is charming,' Robert slowly said, and he went on with his work. Janet was disappointed. He did not seem nearly so much gladdened by Gabrielle's visit as Janet was, or as she had expected that he would be.

'So kind she is,' Janet said. 'We are to spend an evening with her, Robert; when shall we go?'

'I don't know; perhaps I shall not go at all.'

'But that would be so very unkind, and such a bad return for her kindness, Robert! And she likes to talk to you about books and pictures and things.'

'She can't care to talk to a man like me,' he said. 'She puts it on, out of kindness; but she can't really care. She knows too many people who are educated and gentlemen; not fellows like me.'

'Oh, but she does care, I know; I could see by her manner. You would not understand her manner so well as I could, Robert. I know she was pleased to talk to you.'

'I have read of such women,' Robert said; 'I never talked

with one before—I mean, except in the way of this wretched business. I suppose they are common enough in that class.’

‘What sort of women, Robert?’

‘Women who can talk of things that rational men care to hear about.’

Janet did not resent this, and indeed did not understand it in any sense disparaging to herself. She always assumed that a poor man’s wife was not supposed to know anything about books, and that her husband would no more complain of her on that account than because she had not brought him a large fortune.

‘She is very rich,’ Janet said, returning to her favourite topic. ‘My aunt says that her husband left her ever so much money.’

‘I shall never leave you any money,’ Charlton said.

‘You gave me your love, Robert, and all your cleverness, dear.’

‘I couldn’t endow you with that,’ he said sharply, and he turned doggedly to his work.

Janet did not quite understand this sarcasm, but she knew that something was wrong with Robert. She saw that, for some reason or other, the visit she had looked forward to with so much hope, and which had given her such delight, had not yet added to her husband’s stock of happiness. Robert did not talk any more. He looked up once or twice, and glanced around the room, and at Janet. The room showed very mean and pitiful in his eyes; his work seemed mechanical and ignoble; and Janet’s hair looked less glorious than usual.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROLLING STONE AND THE MILLSTONE.

ROBERT CHARLTON was a man just clever enough to be bitterly discontented, and loving enough to be morbidly jealous. He had had no school education. He had somehow got it into his head that he must have come of a high family, and that anyhow fate had done him a personal wrong in not making him a gentleman. His way of educating himself had made him dogmatic, and had allowed him to grow into the conviction that he had genius far above his sphere or his chances. The very work which he could do so well, and which was in its own way strictly artistic, he despised even while he

was vain of his success in it. He was short of stature and feeble; and he convinced himself that only handsome men were ever really loved by women. He made himself miserable in his love-making days when Janet would not marry him at once, because he persuaded himself that if he had only been tall, handsome, or a gentleman, she would have taken him without delay; and now that he was married he made himself miserable with the idea that his wife's head might be turned by the admiration of anybody who was tall, or rich, or handsome; not to say by anyone—and, alas! he knew how many such there were!—who was tall, handsome, and of high social position all at once. He girded at men or women of position if he supposed they were presuming to patronise him; and he raged at them in silence when they seemed to take no notice of him. The countesses and other fine ladies of whom Mrs. Bramble had spoken filled him with wrath when they came and sat condescendingly by him in his room and watched his work. He knew that their familiarity was only the cruellest evidence of the fathomless gulf they supposed to exist between him and them. They never spoke to him on any subject that was not in some way connected with his craft. It was with perfect truth he had said that Gabrielle was the only lady with whom he had ever really talked. She was not, good sooth, of the countess or duchess class; but he saw that she was a lady who might have held herself at a wide distance from him, and therefore, when she sat and talked with him in such an unaffected and friendly way, he felt an entirely new sensation of gratified vanity and stimulated intelligence stirring within him. It pleased him to say to his wife that Mrs. Vanthorpe did not care to talk to him, and to draw forth Janet's simple earnest assurance of her conviction that Mrs. Vanthorpe felt great delight in his conversation.

Janet had gone to bed early, and her husband remained in their sitting-room working. Presently he heard the street-door open to some late lodger, and after a few moments he heard a familiar step coming up the stairs towards his room. He knew that it was Fielding's step, and at the moment he was not glad of the visit. His feelings towards Fielding were a curious compound of liking and dislike, of sympathy and distrust. In the first place, he was inclined to dislike Fielding because the latter was tall and good-looking. On the other hand, Fielding seemed, like himself, to be poor, and to be discontented with the world. The sweet and sacred bond of poor devilship, therefore, ought to have held them together; and this was a bond which, to do

him justice, Charlton was inclined to recognise. What particular occupation Fielding followed he had never been quite able to make out, but in that house men did not trouble themselves much about each other's occupations.

The step came to his door, the knock which he had expected followed, and Fielding came in.

'Hard at work, as usual,' Fielding said. 'I say, Charlton, what a fagging fellow you are! You are always slaving. You ought to make a fortune.'

'Yes, I am very likely to make a fortune!' Charlton grimly said. 'People in this old building often make fortunes, don't they? What an opulent fellow Lefussis is, for example.'

Charlton motioned to the effect that there was a chair at Fielding's service. Fielding accepted the invitation, somewhat careless though it was, and sat down.

'Lefussis is off his head,' he said; 'he has been invited by that pretty woman who was here this evening to call upon her. He fully believes he is going into the gilded saloons again.'

'He had better get a new coat, I would suggest,' said Charlton, made angry by the idea of any civility being shown to Lefussis which might tend to diminish the value of the kindness offered to himself.

'So he said himself to me,' Fielding answered. 'He isn't ashamed of being poor. That's one reason why I like dear old Lefussis. He is a good deal of an idiot, and a dash of a madman, but he continues to be a gentleman all the same.'

Charlton looked angry. He was always suspecting that people were implying that he was not a gentleman.

'By the way,' Fielding asked, 'who is that woman? She is very handsome, although she is so pale. I am rather curious about her.'

'She is a Mrs. Vanthorpe.'

'Thank you. Yes, she told me that much herself. But I want to know who the Mrs. Vanthorpe is. I should have expected an elderly Mrs. Vanthorpe; but I didn't think of a girl looking as young as Janet there.'

'As—Janet?'

'Yes; as Janet. Janet is your wife's name, isn't it? As Mrs. Robert Charlton, I ought to have said, no doubt, to be properly formal, and not to disturb the mind of a jealous old blockhead like yourself—or young blockhead, if you insist on it; young, that is, in years, but old in absurdity.'

'We were talking about Mrs. Vanthorpe,' Charlton said.

'So we were. Your words, Charlton, recall me to myself,

as they used to say in the Surrey tragedies. Well, I am curious to know something about this pretty Mrs. Vanthorpe. Is she a widow ?'

'She is.'

'That is very strange. I can't make it out.'

'What ? that there should be a young widow ?'

'No, but about this young widow. You see, Charlton, Vanthorpe is not a very common name ; it isn't even as common as Charlton——'

'Or Fielding,' interjected the other, irritated by the faintest suggestion of disparagement to his name or himself.

'Or Fielding, as you say. Well, I knew a Vanthorpe in the States ; I knew him in St. Louis and also in New Orleans.'

'I didn't know you had been in America.'

'Didn't you ? did I never tell you ? Well, that shows how discreet a person I am, and don't bore people with my travels. Of all things on earth, nothing bores one like another fellow's travels. I have been in all sort of places in my time. I knew this Vanthorpe, and we were thrown a good deal together. We rather took to one another, in fact, we two Britishers. He interested me. I don't say that he was the sort of man Dean Stanley or Dr. Newman would have got on with, but I liked him.'

'Was he anything to this Mrs. Vanthorpe ?'

'That is just the thing I should like to know. He never spoke of any Mrs. Vanthorpe but his mother. I presume he had not been the very best of sons ; he talked about his mother in a sort of way that made me think so.'

'What became of him since ?'

'Ah, yes ; just so, exactly ; what did ? Anyhow, his story wouldn't interest you, Charlton, my good fellow, and so I'll use the same discretion you say I displayed with regard to my travels. By the way, are you fond of travelling ?'

'I never travel anywhere. How could I get time and money to travel ? I never was out of England in my life. I have been always working in this sort of way, and I dare say I always shall be. A man who has a wife to keep can't travel.'

'There you go—grumbling again ! You married fellows really ought to remember that you can't have everything in life. You can't have the charming wife, the life-companion, the angel in the house and all that, and have the freedom of a travelling tinker besides. You oughtn't to envy us poor bachelors the desolate freedom of the wild ass—isn't that somebody's phrase ? You would not exchange Janet—I mean, of course, Mrs.

Robert Charlton—for the independence of the freest bachelor Red Indian that ever sold beads and nuts at the Cheyenne railway station.'

'Then you don't know anything now about this man Vanthorpe—the man in America?'

'Man in the South; so he was; in the Southern States; and he burnt his mouth, I rather fancy, many a time. I did not say I knew nothing about him now, Charlton. I only said his story would not interest you, and no more it would, and therefore I am not going to tell it. But I am greatly interested in the Mrs. Vanthorpe I saw to-day, and I wish you would tell me something about her.'

'There's nothing to tell. My wife's aunt is a servant, as I dare say she has confessed to you and everybody she knows long before this; simply a servant. She is a servant in Mrs. Vanthorpe's house, and Mrs. Vanthorpe is kind enough to take an interest in the husband of her servant's niece, and gives him jobs of work to do; and that's how she comes to be here. I know nothing else about her, and I don't ask questions. I know my place, as all the servants say. If one's wife has relations in service, what's the use of affecting to be better than one's class?'

'What a delightful creature you are, Charlton—so genial and full of gratitude and of the milk of human kindness! If ever I get up a great social revolution I shall know where to look for someone to chop off the heads of the bloated aristocrats for me. You have the regulation look of the Caliban-Robespierre-Desmoulins—that sort of thing. I should think, now, you could easily be got to take quite a pleasure in fixing that pretty young woman's neck in the guillotine just because she was kind to your wife and wants to be a lady-patroness to you.'

'She does not propose to be a lady-patroness to me. I gave her my mind pretty clearly on that subject.'

'Did you really? What a nice, polite, refined creature she must have thought you!'

'I don't care; she shan't patronise me.'

'Shan't she? Well, I don't mind, I'm sure. I only wish she would patronise me. We should see which would grow tired first, she or I.'

'I don't believe it,' said Charlton angrily. 'I do not believe you would endure it. At least, I don't know; some fellows have no—Anyhow, I am not to be patronised.'

'Some fellows have no spirit, you were going to say. All

right ; I shouldn't have any spirit of that kind where so charming a woman as that was concerned. If she looked at me in a particular sort of way, I would lie down at her feet. "Oh, sweet, divine creature, come and trample on me," that would be my word. I am quite serious, Charlton, you precocious young-old savage. I should say to her, "Queen of my soul, have the gracious goodness to imprint the heels of your boots on this manly forehead."

'Why don't you make a pretext of asking her whether she is any connection of this Vanthorpe you knew?'

'No ; I shall not do that,' said Fielding gravely. There was a moment's silence.

'Won't you have something to drink?' asked Charlton, seeing that his visitor was not making any movement as if to go away. 'Some brandy and water?'

'Beg your pardon—you were saying—something to drink? No. But that reminds me of what I came for. You just come down to my room. I have got some wonderful burgundy ; that's why I came up for you. Come with me, and we'll have some, or if you don't like to come down, I'll bring a bottle up. But I think we should be better below—we shouldn't spoil your wife's little room with our smoke.'

Janet did not like the smell of smoke, to be sure, but Charlton was on the point of refusing Fielding's invitation coldly for all that. He did not like hearing of his wife's 'little room.' It was not a very big room, truly ; but what manner of man was Fielding to give himself airs and talk patronisingly about people's little rooms? His own room was not by any means a very spacious apartment ; and a man who was still a bachelor could afford to put on the ways of easy comfort at small expense. Then, Fielding was a still younger man than Charlton, and he therefore might be expected to be a little more respectful.

'I see you don't want to come down,' said the irrepressibly good-natured Fielding. 'All right ; I'll bring you up a bottle, and we'll be very comfortable here. We'll open the windows ; or, I say, we'll not smoke? It does not matter for once, and we ought to think of Janet—I mean, of Mrs. Robert Charlton.' In a moment Charlton came to the conclusion that Fielding did not want him to go down, and also that he was patronising Janet.

'Oh no, let us go down,' he said. 'We shall, as you say, be more comfortable in your large apartment than in the little room where Janet and I have to live.'

Fielding looked at him and laughed.

'What a delightful old surly bear you are, Charlton! You are quite a study, I declare. You are a modern copy of the what's-his-name in Terence; the self-tormenting fellow, you know.'

Charlton made no reply. Indeed, he was used to compliments of this kind; and although he deserved them, he could not keep from acting in a way to deserve them. They went down together.

Fielding's room was not a very large one certainly, and its fittings were not luxurious; they were quite in keeping with the general conditions of the place. A round table in the middle covered with a dark red cloth, a few chairs with horse-hair cushions, a little sofa of the same description; a mirror in a gilt frame over the chimney-piece, which if it had been a magic mirror could not have reflected more clearly the story of a poorer-class London lodging-house; an engraving of Her Majesty the Queen, and one or two coloured pictures from an illustrated paper. These were the utensils and the ornaments of the room. But it did not escape the observation of Robert Charlton that there were some smaller properties of a very different kind. There was, for example, a heavy lamp of antique shape, and which Charlton was certain had cost money, and had never been bought by any lodging-house keeper. There were coats and rugs of an expensive kind lying around; there was an ebony writing-desk such as one does not buy in a cheap furniture shop; and in one of the compartments of the desk which happened to be open there was lying a diamond ring which sparkled in the very eyes of Charlton as he entered the room. Charlton had keen sight, and immense observation for costly and beautiful things. He might almost be said to have exchanged glances with the diamond, so quickly did his eye flash on it as it flashed. Fielding may have observed the look, for he too glanced at the desk.

'You must make a lot of money sometimes or somehow,' Charlton said. 'But you will be robbed some night, if you leave such things lying about.'

'Men come down in the world sometimes, don't they, Charlton? You have come down yourself, I am inclined to think; but I don't ask questions.'

This, whether said purposely or not, was touching Charlton at his weakest point. Of all things it most delighted him to have it supposed that he had come down to his present position from some place in society. He became more friendly to his

companion at once. Moreover, he was sympathetic enough to understand that a man who had once had money and had mixed in good company would like, through whatever difficulties, to keep with him some relics of the departed brighter days. So much was he softened towards Fielding, that he could not help admitting to himself that his host must have looked a handsome young fellow in the season when the diamond ring and the other costly things were appropriate to his every-day life. The burgundy proved to be delicious, and Charlton had the most of it. He observed that Fielding enjoyed it and seemed to appreciate it, what he did drink of it; but he certainly drank very little. The thin pale face of Robert Charlton began to colour and glow a little with the genial effect.

They talked of many things, and argued and disputed not a little. Charlton observed that Fielding often brought the talk back to Mrs. Vanthorpe. Charlton, however, had little to disclose on that subject, for he knew very little himself. As they were separating, Robert's quick eye fell upon the back of an old letter which Fielding threw down after having torn a part of the envelope to light his cigar. He observed that it was addressed to '— Fielding, Esq., Langham Hotel.'

'So you were once living at the Langham Hotel? Pretty expensive place, isn't it?'

'Stayed there after I came back from America last,' Fielding said coolly. 'A man has money sometimes, Charlton, and some of us are never happy when we have it unless we find some way of spending it. Yes, you can spend money at the Langham if you like; but I don't know that it is a particularly expensive place in the ordinary way. Many American fellows go there; I went with an American fellow.'

'I just remember something, by the way,' Charlton said suddenly. 'You have a good many books, Fielding. I wonder, have you anything among them that would throw a light on something I want to know about just now? I have got a fan to repair, and there must be some new colouring put to it. It's a fan with little pictures of famous places—the Parthenon at Athens, Alhambra, and that monument—the Taj Mahal, isn't it?—in India. I want to get a right notion of the general colours, you know; not to do as a man did who gave a general tone of grey to the Coliseum and of red to the leaning tower of Pisa.'

'I have not any books,' Fielding said, after a moment's thought; 'but if you show me the thing, I dare say I can tell you all you want to know. I've seen all these places, and I

think I can remember perfectly well what they were like,—as to shades and colour; and all that.'

'You have seen all these places?' Charlton asked, in undisguised wonder.

'Yes, I told you I had been in some places,' Fielding answered carelessly. 'I have been a sort of rolling stone in my time; and you see I haven't gathered much moss.'

'I have been a millstone fastened here and grinding here all day; I don't know that I have got much by that.'

'You might make quite an instructive fable of that, Charlton. What the millstone said to the rolling stone.—A rolling stone once being rebuked by a millstone;—you see the idea?'

Then the millstone and the rolling stone were separated for the night.

Next day Charlton said to his wife: 'I don't know what to make of that fellow Fielding, Janet. I wish you would avoid making much acquaintance with him.'

'I hardly ever see him, Robert, unless when he comes in to see you. Why don't you know what to make of him?'

'He has been everywhere, travelled all over the world almost, Greece, Spain, America, India, every place. He has all the ways of a man who spends money; he has diamonds, and he gave me burgundy last night that must have cost a big price. And what is he? what does he do for a living?'

Janet suggested that perhaps he was in the City.

'Stuff, Janet! sometimes he doesn't go out for three days together. I thought he might be a literary man, but there's no one of that name in the field that I ever heard. He isn't a painter, for he never paints. He isn't a newspaper writer, for he doesn't often go out at nights.'

Janet was going to say that he was a very nice gentlemanly man anyhow; but she reflected in time on the inexpediency of indulging in praise of any male creature. She had begun her sentence, however, and she had to finish it; so she suggested that possibly he might be a detective.

'A detective! You are a fool, Janet. No; he isn't a detective, you may take your oath of that. - If I have any suspicions at all, they point a very different way.'

CHAPTER VI.

GABRIELLE'S CLIENTS.

IF mental activity constitute the nearest approach to happiness in mortals, as the philosophic prose-poet maintains, then Gabrielle Vanthorpe's condition just now ought to have been happy. Her mind was much occupied with more or less advanced and active projects for the benefit of her fellow-creatures. She was determined to win again the affection of Mrs. Leven by finding out her lost son and restoring him to her arms; and strange as the idea may seem, she had all but persuaded herself that the young man she had seen in Bolingbroke Place could put her on the track of the lost one. If Gabrielle had ventured to confess boldly to herself all that her fancy would fain have persuaded her to be true, she would have said that she imagined the young man Fielding himself to be the vanished prodigal. But even if this should not be so—and she did not dare to tell herself too plainly that it actually was so—it seemed certain to her that the young man must know something of the matter. Else why did he seem so much surprised to hear the name of Vanthorpe? It was an uncommon name; but there was nothing in its sound to amaze anyone, unless he had some particular associations connected with it. At all events, one of her schemes had to do with Fielding and Bolingbroke Place. Another of her schemes had to do with Bolingbroke Place as well, but it concerned the happiness of Robert and Janet Charlton. She proposed to make the one wise and content, and the other happy.

She had other projects, too, and other people to protect. Gabrielle had ventured on writing a short letter to Walter Taxel, asking him to come and see her some day, and telling him she had one or two favours to ask of him. She had long admired his singular good nature, his willingness to serve anyone, and his restless energy, which was always occupying itself in new fields. She knew that he was at once amateur politician and amateur musician, and she had just now occasion to appeal to his kindness and his help in each capacity. She thought he ought to be able and willing to lend a hand to Lefussis in his important project for saving England. Gabrielle did not exactly believe that the salvation of the country really depended on Mr. Lefussis, or even on Mr. Lefussis and Walter Manny Taxel

combined. But still she thought that if danger of any kind were impending, it might be as well not to neglect any chance of averting it. Even the most elementary reading of Roman history warned her against supposing that only wise and noble birds can do anything to save the Capitol.

That was one object she had in view in sending for Taxal. Another was the cause of a girl who was believed by her friends to have marvellous musical and dramatic talent, and who only wanted a chance to throw Europe into ecstasies and make a fortune for herself. This young lady lived with her brother, much older than herself, and the brother had been Albert Vanthorpe's fencing-master years ago. When Gabrielle settled in Albert's house, he sought her out and made his appeal to her; and Gabrielle, without giving the matter ten minutes' consideration, had taken up the cause of the sister, and was prepared to champion her musical capacity against, if needs were, the Royal Academy of Music and a whole sceptical world. Now she thought Walter Taxal would be the very man to help this girl into a position which would enable her to help herself. Another woman in Gabrielle's place would have hesitated about writing to Taxal, for there had been at one time a vague idea that if Albert were not there Taxal might have become an admirer of hers. But Gabrielle never thought of such a thing now, and perhaps in any case would not have allowed any such mere conjecture to interfere between her and the chance of getting Walter Taxal to do good to himself and others by helping his fellow-creatures. 'There is somebody wanting to be helped, and here is somebody capable of giving the help'—it was after this fashion that Gabrielle would have reasoned—'What ought anyone to do who can do it but try to bring these two together?' She would rather have written to Major Leven than to Mr. Taxal, so far as Lefussis and the redemption of England were concerned; but she could not write to Major Leven while Major Leven's wife would not speak to her; and in any case Major Leven could neither appreciate nor assist her young musical prodigy.

The day when Gabrielle was expecting the visit from Mr. Lefussis she received a card from Walter Taxal. She was sitting alone in the melancholy room that we may call her sanctuary; but she would not receive a visitor there. She hastened to her drawing-room, and there saw two figures, not one. When she entered, one of the two ran towards her, and caught her in his arms and kissed her. When she saw who it

was, she returned his kisses ; and the tears were in her eyes and in his. Walter Taxal stood modestly in the background.

'How kind of you—oh, how kind of you to come and see me,' Gabrielle said. 'I did not like to write to you.'

'My dear, I was always fond of you since I knew you,' Major Leven said, recovering his voice as well as he could. 'I always knew you for a sweet good girl. You have a friend in me, no matter what anybody may say. When Taxal told me that he was coming to see you, I said to myself, "I may come too, I may come too; Gabrielle must be changed indeed if she won't receive me, and take my visit as it is meant, you know." I can't answer for others, Gabrielle, but I can answer for myself; and I am your friend, my dear, always your true friend.'

'How is Mrs. Leven?' Gabrielle asked timidly. 'Does she ever speak of me? Oh, how I loved her.'

'We have spoken of you, but not much, Gabrielle; not much as yet. It would not be well, perhaps, you ladies have odd ways—not all of you, I don't mean—but some of you. But she'll come round. I have been talking to her about her son—the other son, you know—I hope he is alive.'

'I am sure he is alive,' said Gabrielle suddenly, and then checked herself.

'But here is Taxal,' Major Leven said, 'and I know you want to talk to him about something. I just came round with him. I didn't mention Mrs. Leven that I was coming, you know; it would not be of any use rousing premature feeling—'

Gabrielle smiled with tear-sparkling eyes, and held out her hand again to Leven in token of understanding and friendship. The kindly and chivalrous Leven pressed it to his lips.

'We will trust to time,' said Gabrielle bravely. 'She will love me again, Major Leven.'

'She will; she can't help it,' Leven declared energetically. 'Well, I am truly happy to have seen you——'

'No, you must not go yet,' Gabrielle interposed. 'I want you too, as well as Mr. Taxal. Do, Mr. Taxal, excuse us if we have been rudely inattentive. Major Leven and I are such old friends; and we have not seen each other this long time, and so many things have happened since we met last.'

Walter Taxal hastened to assure her that he was not in the least put out by the fact that he had been overlooked for a moment. Truth to say, he did not seem to harbour any deep resentment. Then Gabrielle began to unfold her projects; first, as regarded Mr. Lefussis. There was somewhat of a twinkle in Taxal's eyes when the name was mentioned.

'Surely we know something of Lefussis, Leven!' he said, turning to his friend. 'The man, isn't he, who proposes amendments at all the Conservative working men's meetings, and is invariably hustled out for his pains? I fancy he is not a very bad sort of fellow; a little out of it, perhaps, in the head. But how you came to know him, Mrs. Vanthorpe, I cannot imagine.'

'What does he want us to do for him, Gabrielle?' Major Leven asked. 'Tell him I'll do anything you ask me; only, my dear, I think I wouldn't be getting all sorts of odd people round me. You don't understand; you will be found believing everything everybody tells you. Now, I don't say a word against this poor Lefussis; I dare say he is a very honest fellow; but you must be cautious; you don't know anything of the world.'

'Listen to him,' Gabrielle said, 'to him who believes every tale of grievance everyone tells him in the streets, and who has to leave his purse at home if he is not to get rid of all that is in it before he comes half-way to the end of a walk! He would bid me be cautious and careful and knowing about the world, and all the rest of it.'

'Well, well! good advice, you know, is good advice, even though one isn't always wise oneself. You must be prudent, Gabrielle, and not set people talking, not give them a handle, and all that. If Taxal and I ever make fools of ourselves, why it doesn't much matter. But tell poor Lefussis I'll do anything I can. Let him come and see me; he'll see Taxal to-day; I can't wait.'

Gabrielle could not well explain to them what Lefussis proposed to do, except generally to save England. Major Leven shook his head gravely, and expressed his fear, in all seriousness, that that was past praying for. But he declared that he was not for openly proclaiming despair, and that he would work with Lefussis or anyone else in a good cause. Then, as he had no end of other engagements, and as Mr. Taxal wanted to talk over some of them with him, it was arranged that Taxal should accompany him on some of his errands, and come back a little later in the day to see Lefussis and to hear the young aspirant for the crown of lyric song. It may be remarked that Taxal, for all his stock of native enthusiasm, grew grave when he heard of the new singer, and thought hers a far more difficult undertaking than that of Mr. Lefussis.

The time seemed long and slow to Gabrielle when Leven and Taxal were gone, and she was left alone. She did not like

now to be left alone. In her girlish days she had delighted in occasional solitude, but now loneliness oppressed her. It set her thinking of the youth who had loved her, and tormenting herself with doubts as to whether she had been to him all that she might have been. It allowed her to go over and over again, to no purpose, the story of her long companionship with Mrs. Leven, and its harsh and sudden severance; and again she tortured herself by trying to make up her mind as to whether she was to blame, and whether there was anything that she ought to have done in time and had not done. Her schemes of active benevolence, too, seemed to grow chill and bodiless when she was long alone. Her eager temperament faded and withered in enforced inactivity. She was glad when her maid came to tell of the arrival of the aspiring singer, and the singer's still more aspiring brother.

Professor Elvin—he was professor of the art of arms—entered the room with a long gliding step forward, and then a short step, and then a long gliding step again. He was a man of forty, with hair and beard already turned grey. He was straight and almost as lithe as one of his own fencing foils; and he was always in some attitude that now suggested soldier, and now actor, and now again dancing-master. His beard and moustache were neatly trimmed; the beard into a little peak, the moustache into points. He was dressed in a dark blue single-breasted frock coat, fawn-coloured trowsers, and wore lavender gloves, glossy and glazed with newness. Miss Elvin was a sallow girl, who looked as if she had stepped out of a mediæval painting—her chin was so pointed, her mouth was so large, her lips were so thin, her eyes were so long and mournful, her drapery was so darksome in its green. She had a way of first lowering and then suddenly raising her eyes, which discomposed the stranger. She accepted Gabrielle's genial welcome with a proud humility, like one who, conscious of supreme merit, leaves it to whomso it concerns to take the responsibility of making it known to the world.

'Yours is a noble ambition,' Gabrielle said enthusiastically, meaning what she said.

'We have had enemies,' Professor Elvin said, with a grand wave of the right arm. 'We have had many enemies. You will not be surprised to hear that, Mrs. Vantborpe. My sister's voice and her talents must, of course, make enemies for her.'

'I suppose so; I have no doubt,' Gabrielle exclaimed, with sparkling eyes. 'It is always so, I am afraid; the world is

always like that. But I am not sorry to hear it in your case, Mr. Elvin; I should not have much faith in anyone who did not make enemies. Such enmity is only a tribute to your sister's talents.'

'Just so; exactly so; you are quite right, madam; so we feel it, I assure you. The more I hear of plots and conspiracies against this dear girl, the more I feel encouraged—the more I encourage her. I always say to her, "You ought to be proud of this, Gertrude—proud of it, my sister; it proves that they fear you as a rival." And they do fear her, Mrs. Vanthorpe; and they shall have cause to fear still more when she once begins to make her way.'

'I have had some enemies, undoubtedly,' the young aspirant said, with eyes modestly downcast, and speaking in the restrained tone of one who could tell startling things if she did but wish. 'You would hardly believe some of the things we have known of—known as a certainty—you would hardly believe them if you did not yourself know them. I don't see why they should fear. The lyric stage is surely wide enough for all of us.'

'They have conspired against her, madam; hatched plots and conspiracies to keep her off the boards of the Opera. The most popular singers of the day are in the plot—I won't call them the greatest; they are not great, any of them—and they have made the managers promise that she shall never have a chance. Why, I am in a position to prove that——' (he named a famous queen of song) 'actually told the manager that she would never sing for him again if he as much as gave Gertrude a trial.'

'But that is unspeakably mean and pitiful,' said Gabrielle; 'I cannot imagine anything more ignoble. Oh, it is too shameful.'

Miss Elvin tossed her head and shrugged her shoulders, as if to signify that really that was nothing, if Gabrielle knew but all.

'When self-conceit once gets possession of the mind,' the Professor loftily said, 'there is no measuring the depths of folly and meanness to which it will carry its victims.'

'That is only too true,' Gabrielle answered, so earnestly that Miss Elvin looked sharply up at her, as if suspecting for a moment that the remark had in it something of present application. But Gabrielle spoke simply and in perfect good faith; marvelling at the injustice and selfishness of a great singer, who, herself fed with success and fame, could endeavour to keep this

poor young aspirant from even having a fair chance of showing what she could do.

'What I don't quite see,' said Gabrielle meditatively, 'is how we are to battle against this conspiracy. Don't think I would have you fail in courage, Miss Elvin, or that I would fail in courage myself. Only, if all these great singers are in a band against us'—Gabrielle had already made Miss Elvin's cause her own—'I fear we can hardly do much against them.'

'Oh, madam, don't be at all intimidated. We shall soon crush them; crush them, madam, as completely as base plots ever were crushed. They think they can do anything now, because my sister is a poor unprotected girl, with no powerful friends to take up her cause, and only a humble fencing-master for a brother to fight her battle. Ah, if it were a battle that could be fought by a man's right arm, they should see! But when they find that she has some friends after all, rich and powerful friends, it will be a very different thing, Mrs. Vanthorpe; a very different thing, madame. We'll soon bring the managers to their knees, and the press, ma'am, the critics who are now in league against us.'

'But, Mr. Elvin,' Gabrielle said, very earnestly, for she was anxious that the brother and sister should be under no illusions, 'I am afraid you must not think of gaining any rich or powerful friends through me. I am not rich, and my friends are not powerful. I can only offer your sister sympathy and a helping hand.'

'You are a lady, madam, of rank and distinction, whose name is already becoming a household word for deeds of noble and discriminating generosity. Pardon me, Mrs. Vanthorpe, if for once I decline to allow even you to interrupt me; I say this, madam, in your presence, because it is the truth. You have friends among the rich and the powerful. The distinguished young nobleman whose name you did me the great honour to mention to me is celebrated wherever music is known as a patron of the art as judicious as he is generous. A word from him—a word in season, madam—will amply prove to all the world that Gertrude Elvin is no longer an unprotected girl on whom envy may trample with impunity.'

'Well,' Gabrielle said, when this burst of eloquence had passed away, 'I am sure Mr. Walter Taxal will do all he can to assist anyone who deserves his help, and whom——'

'And whom you recommend, Mrs. Vanthorpe—whom you recommend. Gertrude and I are well aware to whom we shall owe any effort that may perchance be made on her behalf.'

'But you know, Mr. Elvin——'

'I call myself Professor Elvin,' the eloquent fencing-master observed, with a deprecatory movement of his hand and a melancholy smile that seemed to say, 'I know it is a weakness, I know it is not a legal claim; yet prythee indulge me in at least this poor conceit.'

'I beg pardon; of course I should have said Professor Elvin; you know that I do not even pretend to be a qualified judge of singing.'

Professor Elvin made a gesture of earnest protestation, as if to imply that there really could be nothing in musical or any other science concerning which Mrs. Vanthorpe was not a perfectly competent critic, authority, and judge.

'No; I really know very little about it, not nearly enough to make me even fancy myself qualified to have a decided opinion; and in any case I should be carried away by my inclinations, and your sister would seem to me to be Patti or Nilsson if I were on her side, as I am.'

'But excuse me,' the Professor said with a smile, 'Patti or Nilsson! We hope to shew you that Gertrude has much higher pretensions than to be classed with singers like Patti or Nilsson.'

'I don't think anything of Patti or Nilsson,' the aspirant herself said, in her low thrilling tone. 'They belong to a school with which I have no sympathy; I say so quite apart from any feeling of resentment which I might be justified in entertaining.'

'You see, then,' Gabrielle resumed, 'this only shows how little qualified I am to judge. I thought these were two great singers.'

'You are very good, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' the Professor observed. The comment was intended to imply that it was only out of sheer goodness of heart that Mrs. Vanthorpe condescended to regard such persons as singers at all.

'Then you see,' said Gabrielle, 'I cannot answer for Mr. Taxal's judgment. He perhaps may form a different opinion, Professor Elvin, from that which you and I form. We can't tell; we shall have to wait until—until——'

'Until he has heard Gertrude? Certainly, Mrs. Vanthorpe; that is what we desire; that is all we desire. We have no fear of the judgment of one so qualified as Mr. Taxal, although he is but an amateur. Gertrude only longs for an opportunity of proving to Mr. Taxal that she is not unworthy of your countenance and recommendation.'

'I am not afraid of the issue,' the aspirant said, first casting her eyes down and then suddenly turning all the light of them full on Gabrielle's face.

'Here is Mr. Taxal, just come in time,' Gabrielle said, delighted that he had come, and delighted too with the courage, the confidence, and the deep bright eyes of the aspirant. 'It is like that I would have a woman,' she thought; 'brave, strong, confident in her powers when she has them.'

Walter Taxal came forward somewhat awkward and timid-looking, and he positively blushed as he was presented to Miss Elvin, and she, having first dropped her eyes on the ground, then raised them to his and fixed him with an imploring gaze. No time was lost in making the experiment. The aspirant sat down to the piano and accompanied herself; her brother turned the leaves of the piece of music which she had chosen. Walter Taxal's short sight rendered his undertaking such a task a dangerous experiment; and moreover Professor Elvin had gently urged that, to appreciate his sister's singing, the mind should be absolutely free from the strain of any duty, however welcome and graceful. Gabrielle stood behind the singer, full at once of fear and hope. Professor Elvin turned over each leaf with the action of a man delivering a final and triumphant thrust to some rival swordsman.

The singing? Well, Miss Elvin had a voice of tremendous power and compass. There was a raw keen raucous energy about it that at first was positively startling. The little glass drops of the chandelier all rattled and echoed as the first notes played in among them. The strings of a harp at the other end of the room vibrated shrilly. The leaves of open books fluttered and rustled like startled birds. The room seemed to be filled to painful distension with the volume of sound; the singer herself appeared to be possessed by her voice like a sibyl with the prophetic fury. Every limb of her moved; every bone and muscle seemed to be in corresponding motion as the sounds came forth. Her shoulders, her arms, her back, her knees, all were agitated together; not a vein was quiet; the contortions of the sibyl at least were there. When she finished, it was as though she flung voice and song away from her with a passionate energy, like that of Atlas sick of his burden and tossing a world into unending space. Then there was silence, and Professor Elvin fell into an attitude and waited. Gabrielle fixed her eyes beseechingly on Walter Taxal.

'Great power, great power, quite a tremendous organ; no doubt about that,' he said, after a moment's pause. 'This

young lady is to be congratulated, really to be congratulated, on the possession of such a voice.'

'Not many like that, sir, on the lyric stage now,' Professor Elvin said defiantly.

'Not many like it; oh, no, certainly not; very rare, I am quite sure. Yes; the voice is all right enough. A little more, perhaps, of culture, don't you think? Perhaps a certain want of training may be evident at times. The young lady has not been taught in Italy, perhaps?'

'No sir, she has not,' her brother said sternly.

'I would suggest,' Taxal went on, in a deprecating and even timid tone, 'if it could be arranged, you know, that before venturing on a trial at the hands of any of our great people here—our managers, you know—she should have some little finishing training in Italy. People think so much of Italy; partly a superstition, I dare say, but it might perhaps be well to give in to it.'

'Then you don't think my sister is fit to take a place on the lyric stage at once?'

'Well, I don't exactly say that; and you must understand that my opinion is that of a mere amateur. I don't pretend to a decisive judgment of any kind; but I would suggest that a little more training would be well. One can't suffer, you know, from a little more training at any time.'

Miss Elvin rose from the piano.

'I might say,' she said with downcast eyes, 'that a singer is hardly able to do justice to herself with an instrument like that. It is an excellent piano for all ordinary purposes, I am sure; but it is hardly the instrument for an artist.'

'Oh, no,' Gabrielle interposed, seizing the opportunity for coming to the rescue; 'that piano is nothing that a really great artist ought to touch. I felt all the time that it was not quite fair to Miss Elvin to ask her to sing to it. But I was so anxious to hear her, that I could not wait for a better time.'

'Mrs. Vanthorpe is all goodness,' Professor Elvin said in the tone of one who tenders to his wronger a Christian but reluctant forgiveness.

'Oh, I probably could not have done any better in any case,' Miss Elvin said bitterly.

There was another pause. Everyone felt depressed and awkward. At last Walter Taxal hit upon something to say. He happily remembered that there was to be a concert given in a few days at Lady Honeybell's, in aid of the cause of independence in Thibet, and he thought it would be a capital thing if

Miss Elvin were to sing there. It would be a great opportunity. Everyone would be there ; some of the most famous singers had promised their assistance, and many of the greatest patrons of art, professional and amateur, would be among the audience. If Miss Elvin made an impression there, it would be a splendid opening for her. He was sure he could promise that Lady Honeybell would be delighted to enrol Miss Elvin on her list of singers. He would be able to let Miss Elvin know to-morrow.

This happy thought went far to restore satisfaction to the company. Professor Elvin was profuse and statuesque in his manner of returning thanks. Miss Elvin expressed her gratitude with the carefully humbled air of one who submits to being misprised, and wishes it to be understood that, after what has passed, she admits that anything is good enough for her. Gabrielle insisted that for that night at least Miss Elvin must stay with her, as it was too far for her to go home with her brother and return next morning in time to hear the good news which Mr. Taxal was sure to bring about Lady Honeybell and the concert. Gertrude grew brighter at this, and accepted the offer readily. While she spoke a few words to her brother about some commissions he was to execute for her as he was passing through town, Walter Taxal found an opportunity of exchanging a sentence or two with Gabrielle.

‘I hope you are satisfied with what I have said and done for your *protégée* ?’ he asked.

‘Only half satisfied,’ Gabrielle replied. ‘At least I like what you have done very well, but not what you said. You don’t appear to me to be half enthusiastic enough. The poor girl was quite cast down ; there were tears in her eyes.’

‘Well, but really, you know, one must not go too far in praising beginners. You have no idea how self-conceited some of these people are, and what impossible notions they get into their heads.’

‘But surely she has a wonderful voice ? Come, you must admit that much, at least.’

‘Yes ; she has a wonderful voice—very wonderful ; that’s exactly the word for it. I never heard anything like it ; but whether it’s going to be wonderfully good or wonderfully bad is what I don’t quite profess to know. And look here, Mrs. Vanthorpe, excuse me ; don’t you take too much trouble about these people ; they’ll not be grateful to you one bit. You have no idea what such self-conceit can do. That fellow’s a cad, depend upon it ; he thinks he can trade upon his sister’s voice.’

'I am sorry you take it in that way,' Gabrielle said, disappointed. 'I had set my heart on getting that poor girl a chance to be heard, and I know she will succeed. What do I care about her brother or his manners? I feel for the girl; I am sure she has genius; I know she has, and I only wish I could do something for her.'

'Well, we'll all try to do something for her,' Taxal said, in great alarm lest he should have offended Gabrielle, and wishing he had given it as his opinion that Miss Elvin had gifts more promising than those of any songstress since Malibran. 'I am only afraid of encouraging too much hope, letting her in for disappointment and all that.'

'Men have no sympathy but with the successful,' said Gabrielle sententiously, and forgetting at the moment that the man before her had hardly ever in his life been the advocate of any but some lost and hopeless cause.

'Oh, come, Mrs. Vanthorpe, you must really think a little better of us; and in this case I will do all I can; I'll move heaven and earth, in fact, to show you that I am not so bad as all that, and that I have sympathy with merit even before it succeeds.'

At this moment one of Gabrielle's maids brought her a card from Mr. Lefussis.

'You have done too much for me to-day already,' said Gabrielle. 'Can you stand Mr. Lefussis?'

'Mr. Anybody for you. I am only too glad to have a chance of making up for my comparative failure to satisfy you as to your musical friend.'

Mr. Lefussis entered, bowing to Gabrielle with ancient grace, and still carrying his hat somehow as if it were one proper to the courtly costume of a Beauclerk or a Wyndham. He had hardly begun to pay his formal respects when she was informed that Mr. and Mrs. Robert Charlton had come, and were waiting below. This was indeed the evening for which Gabrielle had invited our friends, and she had not forgotten the invitation; but she had certainly failed to observe how time was flying in her various other occupations. It was now seven o'clock. She seemed to the kindly Walter to be a little embarrassed by the simultaneous appearance of such a little crowd of visitors. He glanced significantly at Lefussis and then at Gabrielle, and his look clearly asked her, 'Shall I take him away?' and her reply, conveyed too in one quiet glance, said, 'Oh, yes, if you can.' Gabrielle introduced him to Lefussis with becoming dignity of manner.

'I begged Mrs. Vanthorpe to be kind enough to introduce me,' Walter said, 'although I think you and I have met before, Mr. Lefussis. We have been engaged in the same good cause, I know, more than once. Now, Mrs. Vanthorpe has promised to excuse me, and I hope you will excuse me too; I have to speak at a meeting in the East-end to night, and there is only just time to get a hasty scrap of dinner at my club as I go along. If you don't mind coming with me, we can jump into a cab, get a morsel of dinner, and you shall accompany me to the meeting, and we can talk over the things you want to speak of as we go along.'

Never was a man more delighted than Mr. Lefussis. He did not even stop to complete the explanations he was beginning to give concerning the lateness of his visit, and the delays which had unavoidably made it so late. He took a grateful but hurried farewell of Gabrielle, and went off with Taxal, feeling as if he were suddenly restored to that delightful world of political movement and of brilliant names from which he had long been an exile. As Walter was disappearing, he cast one glance back upon Gabrielle, which seemed to have almost as much meaning in it as the cry that the soldier rushing into battle sends back to his great chief, 'You shall praise me this time, O Caesar!'

Descending the stairs, they met Robert Charlton and Janet. Mr. Lefussis could not refrain from stopping to exchange a word with them in the pride of his heart.

'Glad to see you; haven't a moment to spare. I am just going to dine with young Taxal, Lord Taxal's son; we have to attend a very important meeting afterwards. Tell you all about it to-morrow. Good-bye.'

'Fool!' was the murmured observation of Charlton as his friend hurried after Walter Taxal. 'I am sorry we came here, Janet,' he muttered to his wife as they were being shown upstairs.

CHAPTER VII.

GABRIELLE'S GUESTS.

A BENEVOLENT person once, so goes the story, invited a beggar from the streets to share a meal with him. He gave the beggar rich meats and dry wines, dessert of rarest fruits, cigars and coffee that might have satisfied any frequenter of the *Café Anglais*. A week after, the beggar met him and put in a plea

for a similar banquet. Being denied, he denounced his former entertainer as one who had only given him a tantalising taste for good things, which was never more to be gratified in this life. 'Was I not happy,' the aggrieved mendicant exclaimed, 'before I ever knew that there were things so delightful to be had as turtle soup and dry champagne?'

It is much to be feared that Gabrielle Vanthorpe with the best of motives was entertaining Robert Charlton with turtle and champagne. Not that these delicacies really were produced this evening when he and his wife took tea in the old-fashioned way with Mrs. Vanthorpe. Gabrielle modelled the little entertainment as much as possible after the fashion to which she knew they were accustomed, lest they, or he at least, might fancy that she was treating them like a patroness. But she was unconsciously feeding poor Robert on a fare to which he was wholly unaccustomed, and which he was not likely to have set before him very often. She talked to him with such friendly, kindly ease; she drew him out so delicately on the subjects he best understood; she deferred with such an appearance of sincerity—indeed it was sincerity and not appearance—to his opinion on many things; she entered with such intelligence into all the political and other questions of general interest he touched upon: that Charlton felt as if he were taken by some sudden magic out of his own hard narrow world, with its petty amusements, and its broken glimpses at knowledge, into some delightful sphere where beautiful women enhanced the charm of their beauty by talking like rational men. Mrs. Vanthorpe had a great many books and engravings to show him, and he talked with much intelligence about them and could tell her many things which she did not know and was glad to learn. She took a genuine pleasure in talking to him, and most of the evening passed agreeably for her. She had her heart set all the time on winning his confidence so thoroughly that he would be at last found willing to take her advice, and then she would talk to him about Janet and make him ashamed of his nonsense, and teach him a true appreciation of his wife and of woman in general, and so make happy for ever the life of the poor fair one with locks of gold.

Janet enjoyed the evening to the full as much as her husband did, although in a different way. She had ever since their marriage been accustomed to sink herself so entirely in him that in order to enjoy anything it was only necessary for her to know that he was enjoying it. They had no children, and, as often happens with a young pair in such case, the protecting

maternal sentiment closes around the husband and makes him its object. Janet was proud to see Robert able to talk to a lady of education like Mrs. Vanthorpe, and she anticipated nothing but good from the intervention of one so kind and clever and generous.

The one of the little company who least enjoyed the evening, or rather indeed who did not enjoy it at all, was Miss Elvin. That young lady very quickly found out the social position of Mr. and Mrs. Charlton, and was exceedingly wroth at the idea of being set down to pass an evening with them. She would have liked Mr. Taxal, or some one of that class; but she bitterly resented in her mind the thought of being called upon to amuse people like the Charltons. Gabrielle of course asked her to sing, assuming that she would like to be asked, and afraid that the girl would think her gifts slighted if she were not called upon to display them. Most assuredly if Miss Elvin had not been asked to sing she would have nourished in her mind a very grievous sense of wrong. But now that she was asked she considered it a great piece of impertinence on the part of Mrs. Vanthorpe to invite her to sing for such people as the Charltons. She received Janet's raptures and Robert's somewhat slow and pedantic dissertations of praise with an air of indifference which he must have observed if he were not thinking so much of himself, and which Janet would probably have noticed, only that she hardly ever thought of herself. Gabrielle, whose habit was to interpret everything to everybody's advantage, ascribed the girl's manner to shyness or the sensitiveness of genius, or some such cause not easily to be understood by common people. In truth, the young aspirant's bosom was already swelling with anger against her unconscious hostess, who was only thinking how she could best help her and please her. Miss Elvin set down Gabrielle as a self-conceited purse-proud spoilt favourite of fortune, who despised Gertrude Elvin because she was only a struggling artist, and deliberately sought to convey to her the conviction that she was only good enough to sit down with Charltons and people of that sort. Were it not for the valuable aid she expected to derive from Gabrielle's patronage, the girl would have indulged in some burst of open ill-humour. But she thought, amid whatever sense of injury, that it would be very convenient to be occasionally asked to stay at Gabrielle's house. She and her brother lived out Camberwell way, and she saw herself in her mind's eye writing letters bearing date from Mrs. Vanthorpe's more fashionable quarter. Nor did she forget Lady Honeybell, and the thought of how

very agreeable it would be to be conveyed to Lady Honeybell's in Mrs. Vanthorpe's carriage. Still more perhaps did her thoughts dwell on Walter Taxal, whom she knew to be the son of a lord, and on whom it was not absolutely impossible that the attractions of a gifted artist who believed herself far from unlovely might work some little impression. Already she was longing for the next day, which was to bring the promised visit of Mr. Taxaland perhaps some good news from Lady Honeybell. All these considerations induced Miss Elvin to 'put up,' as she would herself have expressed it, with a good deal of what she would have called the 'airs' of her hostess; although she could not humour those airs to the extent of manifesting the slightest interest in people like the Charltons.

Gabrielle saw during her talk with Robert Charlton that the young singer seemed rather weary and moody, and that she and Janet were apparently not able to carry on any conversation between themselves or to join in a general talk. She went over to Miss Elvin, who was affecting to look into a music-book at the other end of the room.

'I am afraid you are tired, Miss Elvin; or lonely. We ought not to have asked you to sing; it must have fatigued you.'

'Oh, thank you, no,' Miss Elvin said graciously. 'I am a little lonely, perhaps, without my brother. I so seldom go out alone, I hardly know myself without him.'

'I am so sorry,' Gabrielle said quite penitently; 'I ought to have known, I ought not to have asked you to stay. You must forgive me; I never had a brother, and I did not remember for the moment how lonely one must feel without such a companionship when one is used to it.'

This, however, was by no means the sentiment which it would have suited Miss Elvin to encourage. Nothing could have been a more complete frustration of her plans and hopes than that Mrs. Vanthorpe should suppose that she and her brother were inseparable.

'Oh, no, it is not that,' she hastened to explain; 'unfortunately, my brother and I have to be only too often separated as it is, Mrs. Vanthorpe. He has to give lessons out of London—in Brighton and other places, and sometimes I don't see him for days and days together. If I were at home now, the chances are that I should be sitting alone there. Oh, no, it was not that I meant. What I meant to say was that here in this charming house of yours, made so welcome by your kindness and so happy, it seems a sad thing that he should not be

here too; that he should be away, working perhaps with uncongenial people for a living.'

'Ah, yes; I can quite understand that,' Gabrielle said softly. 'If I had a brother I am sure I should feel as you do. There can be no friend like a brother.'

'Pardon me, Mrs. Vanthorpe; you could hardly be expected to feel as I do. You could hardly have the occasion. If you had a brother, he would be a gentleman of fortune; he would not be going about the world giving fencing-lessons for a living. You would not be going to face the great cold hard world, to expose yourself to slight and reproach, to fail perhaps.'

'You will not fail, I know; I am sure. We shall hail your complete success before long—and see how young you are! We are all sure of your success. Mr. Charlton understands a great deal about music, and he has just been telling me that he never heard such a voice as yours.'

Miss Elvin's anxiety to please her patroness could not carry her farther than to express with the very slightest bend of her head an acknowledgment of praise coming from a person like Mr. Charlton.

'But the gentleman who was here to-day,' she said—'when I sang. He was not very sanguine. He said all he could to please you, Mrs. Vanthorpe; but it was easily to be seen that he was by no means hopeful. My brother, I fear, spoils me with his praise; he is so sanguine and he is so fond of me.'

'But I assure you Mr. Taxal is much more hopeful than he seems; only he thinks it right to guard against giving too much hope for fear of disappointment. He told me so, when we talked of you before he went.'

'You were kind enough to talk to him about me?' Miss Elvin said, turning the full light of her anxious eyes on Gabrielle, and delighted to hear that she had been the subject of conversation.

'Yes, of course we did; what else should we have talked of then? And he told me he thought it right always to guard against saying too much; I suppose he does wisely in that, but I confess it is not my way, Miss Elvin. When I feel enthusiasm I must let it be seen; but others of course are different. You may trust to his championship all the same.'

'I know that he will try to do anything you ask him, Mrs. Vanthorpe; indeed, who would not? Whatever may come, I shall owe all to you.'

Miss Elvin had grown suddenly very curious on one point. Was Mr. Taxal an admirer of Mrs. Vanthorpe? Was there

any probability that she would marry him? Her brother had given her to understand that Mrs. Vanthorpe had suffered so much grief at her husband's death that she never could think of marrying again; but Miss Elvin was convinced that she knew exactly what value to set on womanly resolves of that kind. She thought there was something in the devotedness of Taxal's manner that suggested a love-making and a possible engagement; and it would be of very great importance for her to know whether there was any ground for this impression. She made up her mind that she would find out something on that head before she committed herself in any way either to Mrs. Vanthorpe or to Mr. Taxal. So, being a very clever little person as well as a great artist—clever, that is, when her moods of selfishness and ill-humour did not get the better of her judgment—she set herself to extract the supposed secret from Gabrielle.

'I have sung more than once to please myself and to please others to-night, dear Mrs. Vanthorpe—may I not now sing something to please you?'

The manner of the singer was particularly propitiatory and winning. She had seated herself in a suppliant attitude beside Gabrielle on a sofa, shrinking as it were beneath her protecting shadow and looking up to her with all her eyes. Now, Gabrielle was one of those rarest of beings—a heroine who did not know much about music. For musical performances in general she did not even care. Long, long hours of delight had she passed in listening even to such poor music and such poor singing as her own. There were times and moods when one chance chord of a piano wafted to her ears; one sound of the trumpet across the park from the barracks; ay, even one bar on an old hurdy-gurdy, odious and insufferable to the cultivated—would set all her pulses thrilling as if with the deepest influence of music. Often had she in one sound drunk in the full sense of that exquisite saying of Richter's hero about the music which speaks of things that in all our lives we have not found and shall never find. But for set musical performances, more especially of the severe and classic order, she had, it must be owned, rather a languid ear. So when Miss Elvin thus gracefully entreated her, she had the misfortune to respond to the invitation by replying that she should be delighted above all things to hear any of the early English or Irish or Scottish ballads—any that Miss Elvin pleased—she loved all of them that she knew, and was sure she should love to hear any one that Miss Elvin might happen to sing. Alas! Miss Elvin never sang that sort of music; oh, never. It did not suit her

voice at all. She was so sorry ; but she never could sing music like that ; in fact, her brother would not wish her to do so, as he feared it would spoil her style.

‘ But I wish to sing something for you,’ she said imploringly, ‘ something specially for you. Is there anything Mr. Taxal particularly loves ? Perhaps as you are such friends you might have a preference for something he likes ? ’

‘ I don’t think I have the least idea of what Mr. Taxal likes,’ Gabrielle said. ‘ I have not seen him for a long time until very lately ; until I asked him to come here and talk about you. I fancy he would think my taste in music barbarous, as you do, I am sure, Miss Elvin,’ said Gabrielle, not at all annoyed, but, on the contrary, highly amused. ‘ Sing whatever you like yourself ; whatever belongs to your style. I shall be sure to like it ; and I hope we shall get you a far more appreciative audience before long.’

This was not, perhaps, a very happy way of putting a singer into great good humour. Miss Elvin performed a song at Gabrielle ; it could not be said that she sang. Then she rose from the piano and made a pretty little bow to Gabrielle, to say, ‘ I have now performed my act of fealty.’ She regarded herself simply as a martyr. Miss Elvin would have judged Julius Cæsar, Michael Angelo, Queen Elizabeth, or Madame de Staël, by his or her capacity to appreciate singing ; that is to say, the singing of Miss Elvin.

The little company did not blend ; it was, if such an illustration may be used, mixed but not compounded. Each of the two guests who would talk at all wanted to talk only to Gabrielle. Robert Charlton was happy to the very fulness of comfort while she talked with him. Her words made him feel clever and eloquent. When she turned to speak to Miss Elvin or to Janet he fell under a pall of silence and began to turn over the leaves of illustrated books. While Gabrielle was speaking with him, Miss Elvin openly took refuge in music-books or photographs. The singer cared nothing about such art as Charlton understood. Charlton would just then have been sorely bored by the music of St. Cecilia.

Gabrielle fancied that Janet must be lonely, having so little to do with any conversation that there was. She resolutely told Robert Charlton to talk to Miss Elvin for a little, and she drew Janet into particular conversation with herself. She was anxious, too, to get some account of Janet’s fellow-lodgers ; to hear about Mr. Lefussis, who was poor, and whom it might be possible in some way to help ; and about Mr. Fielding. Janet

GABRIELLE'S GUESTS.

opined that Lefussis was very poor; but she believed he proud, and she did not exactly see her way to doing anything much for him of that sort. He made her laugh, poor Mr. Lefussis, Janet said. She had often seen him openly mending his old coat as she passed by his room, and she had seen him blackening the seams with ink. Mr. Fielding? well, she did not fancy Mr. Fielding was particularly well off; but he certainly appeared to have money to spend sometimes; and then he always spent it, Janet thought. How did she know? Well, Robert told her; but besides she had known him to do ever so many kind things for lodgers who were in difficulty. There was a poor man died in the second floor of the next house; and Mr. Fielding gave the servant in Janet's house a letter for the widow, and she wasn't to say whom it came from; and the servant did not say, but she waited to see it opened, and the poor widow found there was nothing but a ten-pound note in it. The lady in charge of the house where Janet lived told her that Mr. Fielding was always doing kind things for her, and for her little girls, and for everybody, when he had the opportunity. Janet began to talk so much about Fielding that Gabrielle feared Mr. Charlton might hear what his good-natured little wife was saying, and wholly misinterpret the nature of her enthusiasm. Partly for this reason and partly because for motives of her own she was pleased to have heard so good an account of Fielding, she began to speak of his appearance with a certain admiration, and to say that she had been rather taken by his manner. Suddenly Robert Charlton, who had been trying very unsuccessfully to carry on a conversation with Miss Elvin, and who had had all the difficulties of the task hideously aggravated by his desire to hear what Gabrielle and his wife were saying, broke off abruptly in his attentions to the singer and turned to Mrs. Vanthorpe.

'You were talking of that man Fielding, Mrs. Vanthorpe? I don't know what to make of him; I sometimes think he is not all right; I have been telling Janet to avoid him.'

There was something in his manner which Gabrielle, for all her good-nature, thought unpleasant and presuming.

'I know nothing about the gentleman,' she said coldly; 'but he appears to me to be a gentleman. I was saying so to your wife. She was afraid I might have supposed him to be rather rude in manner; but I did not.'

'I don't know what he does for a living; nor where he gets any money,' Charlton went on with malice awkwardly disguised. 'The worst thing about being poor and living in a

place like that, Mrs. Vanthorpe, is that it compels one to associate with people of whom one knows nothing.'

Gabrielle did not continue this talk; but turned to Miss Elvin, who was now sulking in a corner, and said something to her. The little evening hardly recovered the introduction of Fielding's name. Gabrielle thought Charlton looked curiously mean and vulgar while he was endeavouring to insinuate something vague against the young man in Bolingbroke Place. Charlton was angry with himself because he thought he had displeased Gabrielle; even Janet felt that the atmosphere of the evening had grown less genial. Gabrielle's well-meant hospitality was not turning out a great success. She was a little disappointed herself, and was rather glad when her two guests went away; although she again assured Janet in friendly whispers that she would never rest in Janet's cause until full success had crowned her efforts.

Robert Charlton hardly spoke a word to his wife all the way home. As they got to the threshold of their dismal house in Bolingbroke Place he said to her abruptly:

'There seems no light in that fellow's windows; I wonder where he can be at this hour?'

'Mr. Fielding?'

'Yes; Mr. Fielding, as you call him.'

Janet did not venture upon suggesting that that was probably the right way to call him; at least, that it was the only way known to her.

'Who knows what the fellow's name is?' Charlton fiercely asked. 'Who knows what he is?' I am sure there is something bad about him. People ought to be warned against him.'

They were now in the house, and actually at the door of the little sitting-room which Fielding occupied. Robert had let himself in with a latch-key; a privilege almost necessarily allowed to lodgers in that house. He tried the door of Fielding's room, and found it unlocked. He turned the handle, opened the door, and in spite of Janet's shrinking back and her whispered protest he stepped into the room, dragging her with him. It was not quite dark. The faintest gleam of soft light was burning in Fielding's antique lamp.

'Halloa!' a voice exclaimed; and Fielding struggled up from a recumbent position on the sofa.

Janet started and almost screamed.

'Oh! so you are in, then?' Charlton said, a little confusedly. 'I wasn't certain; so I just looked in to see as we were passing. But we must not disturb you.'

'Come, I say,' Fielding said cheerily; 'you did not look in, you know, just to gaze upon this manly form? I am sure Mrs. Charlton didn't, anyhow.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Janet in horrified protest against the very idea of such a thing.

'Of course not; I said so, you know. No, Charlton, my boy, you looked in hoping to find me here, that you and I might have a midnight talk together; and here I am. I wasn't sleeping; only lying on the sofa and thinking out all manner of things. I am so glad you came, you two. The room was getting to be quite filled with ghosts; yes, Mrs. Charlton, ghosts as thick as leaves in that awful place that people quoted until we all got sick of it. Now you two good fellows have come and the ghosts are all gone! Look here'—he turned on the light of his lamp until it burned with a warm and cheerful glow. 'Now we'll have some supper. I never had the pleasure of catching Janet—I mean, of course, Mrs. Robert Charlton—in my humble dwelling before; and she isn't going now until she helps us first to get and then to eat some supper. Charlton, my good fellow, there's yet some liquor left; there's more of that burgundy. I say, how glad I am that you two have come!'

So he went talking and rattling on in what seemed to be a genuine reaction of high animal spirits after loneliness and depression. He rushed about: he arranged and disarranged the tables and the chairs; insisted on Janet taking off her bonnet and lending a hand in the preparations; pulled all manner of things to eat and drink from cupboards; and in fact made the dull old room waken up and grow lively under the influence of his genial humour and good-nature. Janet was at first utterly puzzled as to how to conduct herself. She was afraid that if she lent herself in the slightest to the unceremonious ways of Fielding, she would be laying up endless stores of jealousy and offence to be treasured against her in her husband's mind. But, to her surprise, Robert seemed, after his first confusion, to be doing his best to fall into the humour of the thing.

'Come, Janet,' he said peremptorily, 'help Mr. Fielding. He is only a poor bachelor, you know, and a good-natured woman might lend him a hand to show him how to spread a cloth.'

Nothing could give Janet more pleasure than to be helpful and friendly to anyone. She only wanted the permission. But as she bustled about the room, and was good-humouredly pushed here and there by Fielding, and called by her Christian name quite as often as not, and Robert Charlton stood by and made

no remonstrance at anything, but was evidently resolved to be in the friendliest mood, she certainly did wonder at the changing ways of men; and she could only fancy that the magic of Mrs. Vanthorpe's sweet influence must be already beginning to work, and that Robert was being cured of his ill-humours and his jealousy. They sat down at last to a pleasant little supper, and Janet was made to have some of the delicious burgundy, which she was not able to admire, honestly thinking it sour and detestable.

'And so you have been in the glittering halls of fashion?' Fielding asked. 'Come, tell us all about it. You Peris who have been within the portals, tell a poor devil shut out what Paradise is like.'

'Lefussis was there,' Charlton said.

'He was going away when we came,' Janet hastened to explain. 'There was a delightful singer there, Mr. Fielding.'

'Was there really? How much I should have liked to hear him; what did he sing? Anything nice from the music-halls?'

'Oh, for shame, Mr. Fielding, to think of Mrs. Vanthorpe having anything from the music-halls! And it wasn't a he at all; it was a young lady.'

'I shouldn't have cared for any young lady, were she another St. Cecilia, while that beautiful Mrs. Vanthorpe was there—and while Janet was there; Mrs. Robert Charlton, of course, I mean. With two such in presence, what care I for singers? The talk of some women is far above singing.'

'Mrs. Vanthorpe looked lovely,' Janet affirmed.

'If one could only see her,' Fielding went on; 'but she does not invite me. I think I'll go and take my stand outside her door every day. She must come out sometimes.'

'You need not do all that,' Janet said in great good spirits. 'If you go to the concert at Lady Honeybell's next Friday she is sure to be there; she is going with the lady who sings.'

Fielding entered perhaps half in jest and certainly half in earnest into the whole question of the concert: where and when it was to be, and whether admission was to be by payment. Then they talked of other things, and a pleasant hour was quickly away. Janet thought she had never spent so free and happy an evening, and she began to hope that a new life was really opening on her.

But when they were alone in their room together her husband suddenly said:—

'Janet, why did you tell that fellow anything about the concert? What is it to him? What does he want there?'

Janet mistook altogether the source of his objection to Fielding's going to the concert.

'Why, Robert, what harm was there in that? We are not going there.'

'Yes; I think I shall go.'

'Oh! but anyhow I am not going.'

'I don't care about that; I would not have told him anything. I wish you had kept your mouth shut. What business has he going there?'

Janet could not understand her husband's anger this time. More than once when he was out of humour she had contrived with innocent coquetry to attract his eyes and his admiration to her beautiful hair as she undid it and rearranged it for the night. She tried the pretty stratagem now again. She loosed the golden locks and let them fall around her shoulders; then coiled them up in some new form, and let them fall anew; she made their sunny splendour gleam under his eyes again and again, but all in vain. Her beauty could not draw him out of his ill-humour by a single hair, nor by all its chains of golden hair, that night.

CHAPTER VIII.

'LADY, DOST THOU NOT FEAR TO STRAY?'

THE next day brought Walter Taxal and glad news to Miss Elvin. Lady Honeybell would be delighted to enrol Miss Elvin among the performers at her concert in aid of the cause of independence in Thibet. The thing had happened in the very luckiest manner. A lady who had promised to sing was unfortunately seized with a sudden illness—could anything be so distressing, and so fortunate?—and Lady Honeybell was just about to rush round town to find a substitute, when the opportune Walter Taxal came with his request, and the request was accepted as a benefit and a favour. Lady Honeybell sent the kindest, most gracious, most flattering invitation to Miss Elvin, of whose brilliant promise she spoke in the highest terms. She had never heard of Miss Elvin before, but she was too delighted at the chance of filling up a place in her programme easily to mince her words of gratitude. Miss Elvin was exalted to the highest degree of self-satisfaction. She had never heard of the politicians who used to thank God that we had a House of Lords; but had she known that there were such, she was now in the mood to give heartfelt echo to their pious

ejaculation. At least she would have thanked Heaven for a House of Lords, because the existence of a House of Lords means the existence of various houses of ladies—ladies like Lady Honeybell, who recognise genius, and are in a position to help it to its bright goal along its somewhat clouded way. After all, Miss Elvin said to herself, it is only the real aristocracy who can understand art, and when they understand can assist it. What did it matter how a person like Mrs. Vanthorpe might think on a question of art? She was not a lady of rank, like Lady Honeybell. The young songstress was in her heart rather angry with Mrs. Vanthorpe. She looked on the patronage of Lady Honeybell not as something got through Mrs. Vanthorpe's means, but as a Providential interposition to rescue her from Mrs. Vanthorpe and transfer her to the charge of some patroness really worthy of her genius and her certain fame.

Miss Elvin's grudge against Gabriel did not, however, go the length of inducing her to hasten her departure from Gabriel's house. On the contrary, she had painted the distance and the inconveniences of her own modest dwelling so ingeniously and pathetically that Gabriel was induced to hope she would consent to stay with her at least until the concert was over. Miss Elvin assented with words of demure gratefulness, and with the secret hope that she might next be asked to stay at Lady Honeybell's, and then be in a position to show that self-conceited Mrs. Vanthorpe how Gertrude Elvin stood in little need of her patronage. Miss Elvin was one of the persons who in lofty moods are prone to describe themselves even to themselves by both or all their names. She was always telling herself of what Gertrude Elvin ought to do, or was sure to come to, or had no right to endure.

Meanwhile Gertrude Elvin became for a few days an inmate of Gabrielle's little house, and enjoyed to the very full all its easy luxurious ways—they were indeed luxury to her—and she turned her eyes whenever she had a chance on Walter Taxal, and reminded herself of the number of men of rank who, as she had heard, became charmed with great singers and married them. She had not yet succeeded in arriving at any satisfactory conclusion as to the nature of Mr. Taxal's sentiments towards Gabrielle; but she was perfectly certain that Gabrielle was doing all she could to secure him for herself. Meanwhile, the girl's company was pleasant to Gabrielle. It took her away from herself. It gave her the sense of doing some good for somebody; and Gabrielle was never at rest unless when she was

disturbing herself in somebody's cause. She was grateful to Miss Elvin for allowing her to hold out that helping hand which the girl took without being grateful for it.

'Now, who in the world are Mrs. Lemuel and her daughter?' Gabrielle asked, on the day before the concert, when Walter Taxal had called to make some arrangement or other with Miss Elvin on the part of Lady Honeybell. 'Mr. Taxal, you know everybody—do you know a Mrs. Lemuel who has sent me her card, with "Mrs. Lemuel and her daughter" on it, and is kind enough to wish to see me?'

'Lemuel?' Taxal said. 'An odd name; I do seem to have some association with it; but I can't recollect it just at the moment. Lemuel?—isn't that the name of some one in a book?'

'Lemuel was the name of Gulliver for one,' Gabrielle said. 'Perhaps that is the association you have with it?'

'Gulliver?—is that "*Gulliver's Travels*"?' Miss Elvin asked. 'I read that book long ago; it is such stuff.'

'No, I was not thinking of that Lemuel,' Walter said; 'I am sure I have some sort of association with the name; and it does seem something like travelling too. Lemuel! Lemuel! What is it?'

The easiest plan appeared to be to see the ladies; and they were accordingly introduced. In her small circle Gabrielle had become a little talked of as a young woman with a remarkable story, good means, and a generous disposition; and she not seldom received calls from previously unknown ladies, come to ask her aid for all manner of beneficent projects. Mrs. Lemuel proved to be a brisk, wiry little woman, with twinkling eyes that seemed to take in all the four corners of the room at once. Her daughter was thin too, but frail and delicate-looking; and had eyes that twinkled much, but did not rove so briskly and to such purpose as her mother's. Hers was evidently the subjective, her mother's the objective, nature.

'I have taken the liberty to call, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' the elder lady promptly began, 'because we used to live in the neighbourhood at one time, and we may in a measure call ourselves friends, by right of having once been neighbours. We English are usually so cold—oh, so cold!—and I do not think it right at all. Besides, we have heard of you as of one who delights in doing good; doing good by stealth, you know, and blushing to find it fame; oh, quite blushing to find it fame, I see. You may have heard of me, perhaps? Now, pray don't say you have not. I am not very vain; but still, one does work for fame—a little, that is.'

Gabrielle interposed something about her recent life not having allowed her to know much of what was going on in the world.

'True, true; oh, of course. Let me then explain myself. I am Mrs. Lemuel, the traveller; I think I may venture to call myself *the* traveller. I have just published a short narrative of my visit to the Court of Siam; the papers are kind enough to speak favourably of it; but it was really nothing; quite a little holiday tour. I will ask you to do me the favour to accept a copy of my book, "From Lake Superior to Cape Horn:" the idea, you perceive, being that a woman should travel alone from the north of one America to the south of the other. There was nothing in it but that; it really could hardly be called travelling. I think of doing the same thing for Africa; that will perhaps be a feat worth talking about—to begin, you understand, at Algiers and come out at the Cape of Good Hope. I should dress as a man, of course; I usually dress as a man. Just cut the hair short and dress as a man, and you may go anywhere. You ought to try it, Mrs. Vanthorpe; a woman of your spirit and your youth might be of invaluable service in teaching the world what we poor women can do.'

'Does your daughter go with you?' Gabrielle asked, looking with some wonder at the frail figure, sallow cheeks, and twinkling eyes of Miss Lemuel.

'My daughter? oh, no; she, I am sorry to say, has no taste for travel—no marked taste. She never accompanies me on any great expedition. She believes she has another purpose in life, and of course we cannot all mould our lives to the same end. My daughter teaches.'

'In schools?' Gabrielle was beginning; 'how very good of her! how useful!'

'In schools, Mrs. Vanthorpe! Oh, no; my daughter does not so narrow herself. No; she teaches in her own rooms to those of her sex who will listen. She tries, as far as a girl may do in such restricted times as ours, to imitate Aspasia—no, I don't mean Aspasia, of course; I mean that very delightful and splendid person of whom we read such noble things—oh, Hypatia, to be sure.'

Gabrielle was attracted more by the daughter than by the mother. She left Mrs. Lemuel to hold Walter Taxal with her glittering eye, seeing that that orb had just fastened upon his; and she turned to Miss Lemuel.

'I wish you would teach me something, Miss Lemuel,' she said. 'I am sure you are doing a good work in the world.'

'If you please,' the young lady interrupted, with eyes that seemed almost to start from her head with sheer eagerness, 'not Miss Lemuel.'

'I beg your pardon—Miss——?' for Gabrielle assumed that Mrs. Lemuel had been twice married, and that this was her daughter by her first husband.

'Claudia Lemuel, if you please. I hold that women are all sisters, and that such vain titles as "Miss" are an offence against their bond of sisterhood. I do not insist on this in the case of anyone who really feels otherwise; I should not presume to address you, for example, otherwise than as Mrs. Vanthorpe, if you prefer to adhere to that form; but I request that I may be personally addressed by my name. I am Claudia Lemuel.'

'Claudia is a charming name; I shall be delighted to call you Claudia. But in the case, say, of Mr. Taxal—how is he to address you?'

'If he desires to address me,' Claudia answered with earnest eyes, 'he must please to call me by my name. My name is Claudia Lemuel; it is not Miss Lemuel.'

'But do you really think it of much importance to insist on any particular form?' Gabrielle mildly pleaded.

'Of the very greatest importance. I have thought of it long and often; it is a question of fundamental truth. Your name is one thing; you are called another: what is that but the beginning of a false relationship between the individual and society? and what can come of a false relationship but falsehood?'

'Oh!' was Gabrielle's observation.

'I should be so delighted if you would come one day and hear what I have to say to those who will listen,' Claudia said. 'I speak to my friends on Sunday afternoons. I do not give lectures or make speeches. I object to women who make speeches; speech-making is one of the falsehoods against society that men have invented. I only converse with those who surround me.'

'I shall be much pleased to come and be instructed by you,' Gabrielle replied, greatly interested. 'Do you speak on religious subjects?'

'I expound my creed.'

'Your creed—yes? that is?——'

'Pessimism,' the maiden said with proud eagerness in her avowal. 'I am a pessimist. Not of the common school, you will please to understand——'

'Of the common school? No; I should have supposed not; and Gabrielle could hardly help smiling.

'No; I do not accept the common doctrine of pessimism at all. In fact, I do not believe that they who undertake to illustrate it really understand it. It is not enough for me to show that everything is ordained for the worst; that is but the beginning; one is only on the threshold then of the great principles which it so concerns women to know. You are not to suppose, either that that was the doctrine of Schopenhauer, or that I, on the other hand, admit anything that Schopenhauer taught on that or any other subject; but I would have justice done even to one who so sadly failed to comprehend the true doctrine of pessimism as Schopenhauer, and who showed himself so utterly incapable of appreciating the place of woman in the great development of the human universe.'

All this and a great deal more was rattled off with a velocity that almost took Gabrielle's breath away, and an earnestness that made her feel ashamed that she could not at once throw her own soul into the controversy.

'Well, you shall teach me all about it, Claudia; I am very ignorant; but, unlike most ignorant people, I think I am really anxious to learn. Do you live with your mother?'

'My mother can hardly be said to live anywhere,' the young lady answered; 'she is at present staying at the Langham Hotel; but she is preparing to go on her travels again. I have lived alone since my father's death. I have chambers; and two friends attend me. I should say that the friends are persons who would in the common parlance of the world be called maid-servants; I do not call them so; I call them friends.'

Gabrielle began to wonder whether pessimism consisted in calling things by names different from those in common use.

'You must have found it melancholy living alone so long a time.'

'Why should I find it melancholy? A man lives in chambers by himself; he is not supposed to be melancholy. Why is a woman to be looked on as less self-reliant and self-sufficing?'

'I don't know,' said Gabrielle. 'I live alone, in that sense; and I don't find that I suffer much from my loneliness; but I have not tried it long; and mine is rather a peculiar case. I think if I had a mother, I would not live alone.'

'But if your mother felt that she was called upon to travel through the world?'

'Ah, then, indeed——' said Gabrielle; and she pursued the subject no farther.

'I am going to give a lecture,' Mrs. Lemuel suddenly said, turning to Gabrielle; 'a lecture at St. James's Hall. I have

been asking Mr. Taxal to take the chair. He is so well known as a supporter of every good cause. It is to be called "*The Travels of a Lone Woman*;" it is to be illustrated with maps and pictures; I thought of something panoramic; but I am afraid I could not work it very well. I would much rather have a woman in the chair, for my part, than even Mr. Taxal. He is too benevolent and will appreciate my motives too well to be offended. It is only for the sake of the cause, Mr. Taxal; to show that we women are not absolutely dependent on you men. Now, if I could prevail on Mrs. Vanthorpe just for once to conquer her congenial modesty, for the sake of a great cause, and take the chair for me——'

'I am afraid my interest in the cause is not nearly strong enough yet to induce me to do that,' Gabrielle said. 'I have no gift of eloquence, Mrs. Lemuel; I should only illustrate woman's incapacity for public affairs, and so give a handle to the enemies of your cause.'

'Strange how some women want courage!' Mrs. Lemuel said contemplatively. 'If you had travelled alone like me from Lake Superior to Cape Horn!'

'I think I would rather walk all the way than take the chair at St. James's Hall,' said Gabrielle decisively.

'Strange!' Mrs. Lemuel again said musingly. 'But you will come to my lecture?'

'I will come,' Gabrielle said—'if I can.'

'And Mr. Taxal has promised to take the chair for me?'

'Oh, no, I didn't promise,' Taxal interposed in alarm; 'I said I would think it over, Mrs. Lemuel. But one has so many things to look after, you know; I may have some engagement; in fact, I am sure I have an engagement that evening.'

'But I haven't told you what the evening is to be yet,' the traveller calmly remarked; 'and you can't know that you have an engagement. In fact, I don't know yet myself what the evening may be. It depends upon when I can have the hall; and all sorts of things.'

This was happily vague, and Taxal began to breathe again.

'You will come and hear me some Sunday?' Claudia said with supplicating eagerness.

'I will come and hear you with pleasure,' Gabrielle said. She was quite taken with the pale eager little girl whose mother, drawn by the call of duty, was about to leave her and travel over Africa. Suddenly the concert in aid of the independence of Thibet occurred to Gabrielle's mind; and she asked Claudia to accompany her there. Gabrielle never could keep from offer-

ing to do something for anyone to whom she felt drawn. The girl delightedly accepted the invitation. Mrs. Lemuel was too closely occupied with the preparations for her own lecture and her travels to attend any such performance. As they were going away, Gabrielle held her hand out to Claudia. The girl hesitated.

'If you wish,' she said timidly. 'If you think it necessary.' She spoke with the manner of one sincerely anxious not to give offence, and yet acting under the influence of some mysterious principle of duty.

'I don't quite understand,' Gabrielle said; 'I only meant to shake hands, Claudia.'

'Yes; but that raises a great question. Why should we shake hands? What real meaning can there be in touching two hands together? It does not insure truth or friendship. It is a form that does not represent a truth; it is therefore a falsehood!' Then she coloured, conscious that now the whole of the little company were listening to her.

'Whatever you think right, Claudia,' said Gabrielle, smiling. 'I confess I never looked at it in that serious light before. But I am coming to hear you, and you shall tell me all about it and instruct my ignorance.'

'I shake hands,' Mrs. Lemuel said, holding forth a stout little fist covered with a man's glove. 'I see no infraction of principle in it. My daughter and I do not hold ourselves pledged to each other's creeds. We are independent. We go our own ways.'

'Quite so,' said Gabrielle.

'Was there ever seen such a pair of fools!' Miss Elvin exclaimed the moment the mother and daughter had gone.

'A most dreadful old woman,' Taxal said; 'but I fancy she means well. I remember all about her now. She has really travelled; I know I had some association with the name.'

'I feel deeply for the daughter,' Gabrielle said earnestly. 'All about her impresses me very much. She has a candid, generous face. She must lead a melancholy life—such a life for a girl! I wish I could do something for her.'

'For her too?' Taxal murmured in a low tone.

'I feel greatly interested in her; I am sure she has a good heart. Her very dreams and fads and nonsense seem to claim sympathy for her.'

'One can't very well feel sympathy with fools,' Miss Elvin observed, greatly angered at the thought that this absurd girl was to have a seat in Mrs. Vanthorpe's carriage on the all-important day of the concert.

CHAPTER IX.

AT A MORNING CONCERT.

LADY HONEYBELL was undoubtedly, as Miss Elvin supposed, a member of the aristocracy. She was the daughter of a Scottish Peer of very ancient family, and she was married to the Earl of Honeybell in the peerage of the United Kingdom. But she did not impress Miss Elvin nearly as much as the singer had expected. She was a bustling, intensely Scotch, and very kindly woman, who went about her drawing-room and tried to make people enjoy themselves on the occasion of the morning concert just as if she had been quite a person of humble class. This was a disappointment to Miss Elvin, who would have liked to find a lady cold, distant, and haughty to other persons, but exquisitely gracious and friendly to Gertrude Elvin. She would have been pleased, for example, if Lady Honeybell had been rather aristocratically repelling in her treatment of Mrs. Vanthorpe. It would have done Gabrielle good, Miss Elvin thought, and taught her to set a proper value upon artists. But Lady Honeybell was immensely friendly to both of them. She was receiving the company rather as if they were her own guests come to five o'clock tea than as the audience of a concert to which she had lent her house and her patronage.

Gabrielle came early, with Miss Elvin and Miss Lemuel. Mr. Taxal was already there to receive them; and Lady Honeybell at once bustled out from a little crowd of friends to greet them, and to introduce herself. She put poor Miss Elvin out, to begin with, by addressing her first and mistaking her for Mrs. Vanthorpe.

'Eh, my dear young woman,' the kindly Lady Honeybell said, 'I've heard of your story and I've heard of your goodness, and I am glad to see ye.'

Here Mr. Taxal interposed, and explained that that lady was Miss Elvin the singer, and not Mrs. Vanthorpe.

'Oh, Miss Elvin; to be sure. I hope you'll forgive me; I didn't know. We are ever so much indebted to you, Miss Elvin, for coming forward at so short a notice to help us out with our little concert. And this, then, is Mrs. Vanthorpe? I heard of you, Mrs. Vanthorpe, from my old friend Major Leven—a good man if ever there was one—and from Walter Taxal too. Walter here helps me in all my undertakings, and he has told me about you. This is the first day you have been into any house but your own, he tells me. Well, it is a good cause.

You are young to trouble, my dear ; but the world is nothing but trouble, they say.' And then some other arrivals called off the attention of Lady Honeybell, and Miss Elvin did not think that she had got very much personally out of the interview so far.

Lord Honeybell, it should be said, was a high and dry old Whig politician who resented every advance that had been made in anything since the Reform Bill of Lord Grey, and who occupied his mind and his time with statistics about the agricultural peasantry, and the question of local as compared with imperial taxation. He never took the slightest interest in any of his wife's various tastes and occupations. He never appeared at any of the meetings, concerts, and other performances that went on under Lady Honeybell's patronage and in her rooms. She was much concerned with new things, and would patronise a new female acrobat if commended to her as a promising person deserving of an honest lady's introduction. She had been a great spiritualist until the attempt at a too ingenious imposture had roused her robust Scotch common sense into play. She was very fond of helping forward deserving young men in the artistic way, and she loved to see her rooms filled with the pretty faces of girls. She was thoroughly good-hearted, honest, fussy, and whimsical ; and she threw her whole soul into each cause or object until it was done with or was supplanted by some other.

The audience soon settled down. Gabrielle sat with Miss Lemuel ; Miss Elvin was withdrawn in order that she might take her place among the performers. It was arranged that Mr. Taxal, who was acting as a sort of master of the ceremonies—Lady Honeybell had neither sons nor daughters—should conduct Miss Elvin to Gabrielle's carriage when the concert was over. Gabrielle had hardly taken her seat when she became aware of the presence of Mr. Fielding.

He had come in a little late, and did not at first see his way to a seat. But he moved all through the rooms with complete self-possession until he had found a place.

During the performance Gabrielle had full opportunity of studying the features and expression of Mr. Fielding, and she made good use of her time. He was an object of peculiar interest to her, and she had never before had more than a glimpse of him. It was the conviction of Gabrielle Vanthorpe, as it is the conviction in their own case of nearly all persons with quick imaginations and of a good many who have slow imaginations or no imaginations at all, that she had great power of reading

the character in the face. As she studied Mr. Fielding's face, neglecting for the purpose many fine exhibitions of musical talent, she came to the certain conclusion that he was a man who had a story behind him. He was still very young, and yet on his face there were melancholy lines which told of more than mere study or reflection or any of the other causes that sometimes cast a shadow over the purple tints of youth. Gabrielle thought she read the evidences of very varied emotions on that dark mobile face. There were traces there, it seemed to her, of passion and of suffering; perhaps of repentance. The moment he looked up at anything the face all brightened, the soft glance of the dark eyes had a gleam of kindly humour in it; there was something almost sunny in the whole expression. But when Fielding looked down the evening shadows appeared to come over his face again. It did not escape Gabrielle's notice that he was every now and then looking furtively and with a certain anxious keenness round the hall, either as if he were in expectation of the coming of some one for whom he waited: or, for Gabrielle thought it might be read either way, as if he were in fear of the entrance of some one by whom he might be recognised.

He was a gentleman certainly, Gabrielle now said to herself. This was made clear to her in various ways as well as by the whiteness of his hand which she could see. Despite the occasional glance round the room, there was an ease and grace in his whole demeanour, in the very way of his entering the room and taking his seat, and every movement he made, that showed him to belong to the class which Gabrielle admitted to be that of a gentleman. Janet Charlton was right on that point, and Gabrielle felt now that she had snubbed her somewhat rashly and unjustifiably. Was he poor? surely he must be poor, to inhabit a house like that in Bolingbroke Place with some of its lodgers for his associates. If he were very poor, how did he come to throw away his money on the concert at Lady Honeybell's? So resolute were the promoters of that entertainment to contribute something solid towards the cause of Thibetan independence, that they had made it a determination—so Mr. Taxal had told her—not to give away one single ticket except to the singers and instrumentalists who had offered their services gratuitously in the great cause. Mr. Fielding, then, who lodged in a small room in Bolingbroke Place, must have paid away a guinea for that day's entertainment; and it was clear to Gabrielle that he, like herself, was not listening to the music.

For a moment her attention was drawn away, wholly drawn away, from her study of Fielding by seeing that Major Leven

and his wife were among the audience. Mrs. Leven was dressed in deep mourning still. Her black dress and that of Gabrielle were two sombre spots distinct among all the bright colours of the room, and seeming to mark out these two women in rivalry or community of gloom. It was hardly possible for any eyes to rest upon the one without immediately after singling out the other. 'Are we not enclosed in a common sorrow?' Gabrielle asked herself—'and ought we not to be enclosed in a common sympathy and affection?' She thought with a certain penitent feeling that she had not been so much absorbed in her sorrow as she ought to have been. The face of Albert's mother was wrought into the deepest evidences of mourning, 'Why have we come here at all, we two women with the one trouble?' Gabrielle thought; 'we should be away from a crowd like this, and sympathetic and together.' Mrs. Leven, she assumed, had come at the urgency of her husband, in whose mind it was of far more importance to do the slightest good for any living cause than to remain at home and mourn for the dead. Gabrielle felt the same persuasion; but she could not say that any course of deliberate reflection and decision had induced her to come out in public. Assuredly she could not even pretend to herself that enthusiasm for the cause of the independence of Thibet had impelled her. So she felt almost like some one detected in wrong-doing by the presence of Mrs. Leven. She would have liked to put herself in Mrs. Leven's way and make an appeal once more to the memories of that old affection which surely could not all be dead as yet, and she would not have refrained from doing this out of any mere dread of something approaching to a scene. But she saw that Mrs. Leven's eyes had rested for a moment on her, and that Mrs. Leven's face became more rigid and chilling in its expression than before. 'She still lays Albert's death to my door,' Gabrielle thought; and the thought sent a shudder through her.

Mr. Fielding, too, was looking at Mrs. Leven. He had perhaps noticed that Gabrielle was looking that way, and followed the direction of her eyes; or he had been drawn by one figure in mourning to look at the other. But now he is looking with evident interest or curiosity on Mrs. Leven's face, and Gabrielle is absorbed in conjecture as to what he sees there. Has he any knowledge of who she is? and, if so, has he any profound and personal interest in studying the changes time had made in her? All Gabrielle's fancies about him came upon her, and she was thrilled through with anxiety and suspense. Certainly Fielding looked long enough at Mrs. Leven to justify

Gabrielle's wonder, and now Mrs. Leven looked up and saw him. He turned his eyes away, but Mrs. Leven appeared to look at him in a wondering and anxious way. Could it be, Gabrielle thought, that she fancied she recognises some trace of a once dear and familiar face? Then Gabrielle began to puzzle herself by thinking whether Fielding could ever have been like Albert Vanthorpe; and though she could not trace any hint of possible resemblance, yet she tried to persuade herself that she could see a certain likeness in the clear and somewhat delicate outlines of Fielding's face to the cold and melancholy beauty—for it still might be called beauty—of Mrs. Leven. In short, our very fanciful heroine was making up for herself a marvellous romance even as she sat there, and was beginning to be possessed by it, as people, whose alarmed fancy tells them of a startling sound, may brood upon the imagining until their ears seem actually to ring with it and to follow every vibration and echo as though such sound were in the air all around them.

Gabrielle's companion had rather a dull time of it if she was not wholly absorbed in the music or in the cause of Thibet; for Gabrielle never interchanged even a whispered word with Miss Lemuel during the whole time since she had become aware of the presence of Mr. Fielding. She did indeed awake to attentiveness each time that Miss Elvin came out to sing. The first time Gabrielle saw her led out to the front of the platform our heroine positively trembled with excitement and forgot all about Mr. Fielding for the moment. She was probably far more excited than the young singer, who showed that serene confidence before the event which is only born of self-conceit, and which so often gives place to mere depression after. Miss Elvin's voice rang through the room; almost appeared to threaten the safety of the window-panes, like a tropical shower of hail. The singer certainly made herself the object of attention and even for a moment of alarm. At first it might have seemed as if she were likely to carry the audience by storm. But after a few seconds the sensation of novelty and alarm died away; and the voice appeared to have only monotonous power. Those who had been startled into sudden and novel interest subsided again and became languid and forgot all about it. Miss Elvin went off with but slight applause; in fact, most of the audience did not know that her performance was coming to an end; and it was impossible to say whether she had succeeded or failed. Gabrielle's heart sank. She returned to her study of Fielding.

The concert had two parts, and Miss Elvin had a second chance, and did better than the first time. She began with a

less tempestuous display of power, and she brought the listeners up to her, so that the effect came at the end rather than at the beginning. A display of mere strength of voice at the end of a song will always carry away a certain portion of any audience, and Miss Elvin had the full benefit of this peculiarity. She received a good deal of applause when she went off the second time, and she had accomplished at least so much that people asked who was the girl with the loud voice? and was she the same girl who sang the song in the first part? Gabrielle had the advantage of hearing some of the comments, and of satisfying herself that there is no recognition of abstract laws of beauty among a modern audience. For many spoke of Miss Elvin as decidedly pretty, others as 'quite too lovely,' some as horribly ugly, some as a plain little thing, and some simply as the girl with the mouth. On the whole, an expert would have said that Miss Elvin's appearance had neither been success nor positive failure; that she had not made a hit, but that she had left it uncertain whether or not she might make it yet. Gabrielle was now only troubled to know how the singer herself would take it.

The concert was over at last, and the audience were melting away. Gabrielle was anxious to avoid crossing the path of Mrs. Leven, and she could not hasten away without waiting for Miss Elvin. The crowd was very great for the size of the room, and there were many recognitions of friends and stoppings to speak to acquaintances and exchanging opinions about the concert and about various other things, not apparently including in any instance the fate of the movement for the independence of Thibet, and Gabrielle suddenly found herself cut off from one of the doors and close to Mr. Fielding.

Of course she might have passed on without seeming to know him. No rule of courtesy bound her to the recognition of a man whom she had seen only once or twice and then in the most casual way, without any ceremony of introduction having been gone through between them. Or she might have recognised him with a quiet inclination of the head and passed on. But in truth Gabrielle had not the slightest wish to get out of the acquaintance. She wanted rather to get into the acquaintance. So she bowed in the most inviting way as he drew close to the wall to let her pass, and she liked the frank brightness of his smile in return.

'We have met before,' Gabrielle said, stopping with her companion and letting the crowd go by; 'Mr. Fielding, I think?'

'I had the honour of opening the door for you,' Fielding

said, entirely unembarrassed ; ' you would have been there until now, I fancy, if I had not done so.'

' You are a great lover of music, I suppose, Mr. Fielding ?'

' Oh, dear no ; don't care about it at all—I mean, about this sort of music. *I hate amateur work in anything.'

' You did not come here for the music, then ?'

' No, I don't suppose anyone did.'

' Then you were attracted by the cause ?'

' The cause, Mrs. Vanthorpe ? What cause ?'

Gabrielle felt sure he pronounced the name of Vanthorpe with a certain hesitation, almost a tremulousness, as if it were charged with some peculiar emotion.

' The cause of the independence of Thibet.'

' I didn't even know that the concert had anything to do with a cause, and I don't know anything about Thibet. Who cares about Thibet ? I am sure I don't care if it never was independent. What does it want to be independent of ?'

' Really I don't know,' Gabrielle said. ' I dare say this young lady is better instructed. What is Thibet to be independent of, Claudia ?'

' Oh, I don't know ; I do so wish I knew !' Claudia exclaimed with all her usual eagerness about everything. ' I am sure Mamma must know ; she knows all about Thibet and every far-off place. I do so wish I had thought of asking her. But my own interests are so different from those of Thibet ; I am so absorbed in my own pursuits.'

' I only came here,' Gabrielle explained, ' to hear Miss Elvin sing. Perhaps you came for the same reason, Mr. Fielding ?'

' Miss Elvin ? The girl with the dark skin and the large mouth ? No. I think her singing is horrible ; she is all airs and affectation.'

' Oh, no, nothing of the kind.'

' Anyhow, I don't care for the screech-owl style.'

' I am deeply interested in her. I want her to succeed beyond all things.'

' So do I now,' Fielding gravely said.

' No, you do not ; you can't ; you said she sang in the screech-owl style.'

' I have changed my opinion,' he observed as gravely as before. Gabrielle did not like this way of looking at things, and would have drawn out of the conversation altogether if it were not that she had a motive for carrying it on.

' May I have the honour of seeing you to your carriage,' he asked, ' if you are not waiting for anyone ?'

Before Gabrielle could answer she found the colour rushing to her face and her eyes growing dim. Close beside her, forced by the departing crowd into actual contact with her, were Major and Mrs. Leven. Major Leven held his hand out to her, and said a friendly word or two before the crowd bore him on. Mrs. Leven looked fixedly at Gabrielle and then at Fielding, and passed on without a word. The agitation of Gabrielle must have been apparent to her companions.

'Do you know that lady?' she said to Fielding, without waiting to consider what she was saying.

'No, I do not know her; but I saw her to-day before, and her face interested me.'

Gabrielle fixed her eyes upon him.

'That lady,' she said in a low tone and with some emphasis, 'is Major Leven's wife; before she married him she was Mrs. Vanthorpe.'

Undoubtedly the news struck Fielding with something like surprise.

'That Mrs. Vanthorpe, then, is the Mrs. Vanthorpe—is she long married?'

'Not much more than a year. You had heard of her before this?'

'Yes. I had heard of her.' He was looking in the direction the Levens had taken; he was trying to see Mrs. Leven through the crowd. Then he turned round to Gabrielle and begged her pardon as if he had forgotten to answer something she had said. Gabrielle was inclined to murmur, 'Oh, my prophetic soul!'

'He renewed his offer to see her to the carriage, and they went down the stairs. On the way he said suddenly:

'May I ask what is the relationship between that lady and you? Pray excuse me if I seem at all rude; but I have a reason.'

'Her son was my husband; he is dead.'

'I ought not to have asked such a question,' he said very earnestly. There was a silence as they went down the stairs. In the minds of both was one common desire, impelled by very different motives. He was trying to get some opportunity or excuse for seeing her again; she was trying to invent some decent pretext for asking him to see her again. She could not, under the eyes and ears of Miss Lemuel, ask him directly what he knew of the name of Vanthorpe, and way it seemed to have some peculiar associations for him. Suddenly he said:

'Will you excuse me if I speak of that lady again? She had another son?'

'She had another son; I hope she has still.'

'Does she hope so?'

At that moment Robert Charlton suddenly appeared among the crowd at the door, and, seeing Fielding and Gabrielle, made a bow to her and hastened away looking very pale and out of humour. Gabrielle also saw Walter Taxal escorting Miss Elvin towards her. There was no possibility of any explanation with Fielding now.

'Mr. Fielding,' she said in a hurried whisper, 'it seems to me that you have said too much or too little. I want to hear something more from you about this other son of Mrs. Vanthorpe—I mean, of Mrs. Leven.' She was already answering the smile and bow of Mr. Taxal, who was hurrying up with Miss Elvin leaning on his arm. The singer looked gloomy and out of sorts. Fielding made his bow and was gone.

Lady Honeybell's house was in Piccadilly. Fielding lounged along the street in the direction of Hyde Park, partly, perhaps, because he knew that in that direction lay Gabrielle's house. He was tormenting himself as he walked slowly on with the thought that he had made an idiot of himself; that he had got into a difficulty from which there was no easy way of getting out; that he had, indeed, to use Gabrielle's words, said too much or too little. An hour before he would have done almost anything for a chance of speaking to her again; and now he began to dread the idea of having to speak to her again. 'Were there ever such eyes?' he thought. 'Was there ever such a sweet, unaffected, noble creature? was there ever such a soul?' The impartial reader may perhaps wonder which of Gabrielle's few and not very striking observations filled this intelligent young man with the conviction that she had 'such a soul;' but conviction comes as quickly as gospel light when it beams from soft bright eyes; seeing is indeed believing then. A laddin had only seen the lovely princess once when he became convinced of her all-goodness as well as her all-loveliness; he had not even spoken to her. Fielding looked back upon many episodes of his own life which in their way he had thought bold and delightful adventures; and he hated the memory of them. The very impulse which had brought him to Lady Honeybell's in the hope of seeing Gabrielle seemed now something to be ashamed of as selfish, intrusive, and mean.

'You saw Gabrielle, Constance?' Major Leven said to his wife, as they were settled in their carriage and going home.

'Yes, I saw her.'

'I wish you had spoken to her, dear; it will do nothing but harm, that sort of thing. I do think, Constance, you might have spoken to her and let all this foolish quarrel come to an end. You don't know what harm you may be doing.'

'Excuse me, George; I don't see what possible harm I can be doing. I think she appeared to be very happy; she was surrounded by friends.'

'Yes, exactly, that's just it; I don't quite like some of the friends.'

'I don't suppose I should like any of her friends. I am sure I know the face of the girl she was with: some woman's rights orator, I think.'

'That girl? No, that was the daughter of Mrs. Lemuel the traveller; wife of Tom Lemuel, who used to be Chief Justice at the Cape. Mrs. Lemuel is a very good woman, though she has her odd ways; her heart is in every good cause. I should be glad to see Gabrielle with such a woman's daughter; it might keep her in serious views of a woman's business in life. Did you see the man she was talking with?'

'I think I saw a tall young man with dark eyes.'

'Well, do you remember old Sir Jacob Fielding?'

'Sir Jacob Fielding? I think I remember the name; was he something in the City? I never liked City people.'

'Something in the City? Well, he was in a manner; but he wouldn't have liked much to hear it put in that way, Constance. He was a member of a great banking-house—Fielding, Lane and Company—and he was one of the most earnest and public-spirited men I ever knew; he was always giving; he would take the chair at anything.'

'This person you speak of, who was talking with her—is he anything to that Fielding?'

'By Jove, Constance, he is his son, if I am not more mistaken than ever I was in my life. I haven't seen him since he was a boy, or little more; but I am sure it is he; and he is very like what old Jacob Fielding himself must have been about that time of life.'

'Is this Sir Jacob Fielding alive still?' Mrs. Leven asked with only a languid interest.

'No, he died four or five years ago. His eldest son, Wilberforce, succeeded to the title; old Jacob was the first baronet, you know. There were two sons; the younger fellow was called Clarkson.'

'Clarkson?'

'After the philanthropist—abolitionist—you know, and that was the first cause of quarrel between him and his father. When the young fellow began to grow up, he said his father oughtn't to have called him such a name as Clarkson. Then the thing went on from bad to worse; the young fellow wouldn't do anything to please his father, and used to say that his father's friends were all old humbugs and I don't know what else, and he wouldn't go to church, and he wouldn't go into good society, and he took to reading Darwin, and Herbert Spencer, and at last they hit it off so badly that he went out of the country altogether. They say he was in a cavalry regiment for a while—as a common trooper, you know; and I believe he was in India and America and all sorts of places. What he is doing here I don't know, but I am deucedly sorry to see Gabrielle in such company.'

'I dare say she will like him all the better because he did not care for the wishes of his father, but I am sorry to think that such persons should be in my Albert's house. I ought to have expected it. Perhaps she will marry him.'

'Oh, come, we must not run away with the story. Gabrielle may have only the slightest acquaintance with him; I dare say she is sought out by lots of people; he may have been introduced to her by some one; she may have been asked to do something for him.'

'Is he poor?'

'I suppose so. I know I heard that he never would touch a penny of the allowance his father was willing to continue to make him after they quarrelled. He was a wrong-headed fellow, but I fancy he was a spirited fellow.'

'He is just the man to please that mad girl,' Mrs. Leven said. 'She is sure to look on him as a hero making war against society and conventionality, and I don't know what else.'

'I'll give her a hint, anyhow,' Major Leven said.

'It will be thrown away.'

Leven shook his head.

'You are altogether wrong about that girl, Constance, and you won't allow yourself to come right. I wish you would go to her, like an old friend and—and a mother, in fact; which you very nearly are, whether you like it or no, and talk to her and advise her. She would take any advice from you.'

'Do you really want to help her, George, and to prevent her from having this person for an acquaintance?'

'Of course I do, Constance. That is exactly what I want to do. I wish you would show me how to do it.'

'I can show you. Go to her and tell her that this young

man was a model son and a pattern brother ; that he is my idea of a most desirable acquaintance and friend ; that I and all respectable friends of hers would particularly wish her to cultivate his acquaintance ; and you'll soon see an end to that whim ; he will not be very long a visitor at Albert's house.'

Major Leven did not see much use in continuing the discussion just then. He knew that his wife's mind was still set against Gabrielle. Major Leven mentally doubted whether any man could by possibility get himself into such a perverted way of judging, independent and in defiance of all facts and evidence, as this well-educated and intelligent woman had brought herself into with regard to Gabrielle. She had evidently created for herself a Gabrielle who bore not the slightest resemblance to the living Gabrielle, and who had not one quality in common with the girl she had known and loved for so many years. But in truth Gabrielle was only to Mrs. Leven what a colonial minister or a foreign minister often was to Major Leven himself. Besides, Mrs. Leven was under the necessity of justifying to herself her own anger and implacability ; and how could this be done otherwise than by persistently finding sins and causes of offence in Gabrielle ? Every day longer that she kept her heart closed against the girl she had been so fond of only made greater necessity for persuading herself that she was not wrong in such a course, and that her love had not turned to hate for nothing. It was not against Gabrielle alone that Mrs. Leven was fighting ; it was against her own conscience and her own self-reproach.

Major Leven puzzled himself all the evening to think how he should most delicately approach Gabrielle with some warning against the acquaintance she seemed to be now making. He thought he would go and see her, and then he was afraid he might not have the courage to press his point. He thought of writing her a letter ; but then, did it seem quite fair to say anything against a man of whom he personally knew so little ? Then, again, if it should turn out that the man was not old Sir Jacob Fielding's son at all ? But no, no ; on that point he told himself there could be no doubt. He never was mistaken in a man. Why, there was the fellow he identified at Lahore whom he had only seen once a dozen years before ; there was the fellow he knew at a glance when he saw him going into the ballroom at Sydney on the occasion of the Duke of Edinburgh's visit, and whom he only once got a glimpse of in the dock at the Maidstone assizes ever so long before. No, that man was old Jacob Fielding's son. Somehow or other, come what would, he must take care that Gabrielle knew at least what sort of person it was

whom she was admitting to her circle of friends. Major Leven's heart was heavy within him.

It would have been heavier still had he known that on returning home that evening Gabrielle, obeying one of her sudden impulses, wrote a short note to Fielding saying that she would take it as a favour if he would call upon her next day.

CHAPTER X.

FIELDING GOES A-VISITING.

MR. FIELDING was undoubtedly a man of irregular habits. It would, perhaps, not be incorrect to say that he was irregular on system; irregular as a matter of regularity. He flattered himself that he was one of the few men ever found in the world at one time who have really made up their minds as to what the world is worth to them. If he had a sort of principle in the matter, or had invented one to excuse his personal peculiarities, it was that man is of his own nature, and when let alone, an infinitely better sort of creature than he can be made by merely conforming to the ways of other people. He excused himself, accordingly, for doing exactly as he felt inclined by the argument that any man, if left to himself, will be found a much better fellow than some other man can coerce him to be. Fielding rose and went to bed, therefore, at any hour of the day or night that suited his humour. Some nights he did not choose to go to bed at all. He read half the night and slept half the day, or did not sleep any part of that day, just as the whim took him. He sought out company when he was in the mood, and he kept away from it when he was not. When in the humour for company he could talk to anyone, and make himself happy with anyone. He had no great opinion of himself; and he was convinced that even when he did a generous thing, it was simply because it pleased him. 'It gives me more pleasure to make a present of that five-pound note than to keep it,' he would say; 'I like the sensation of giving; if I didn't, I wouldn't give. I have thrown away money at Baden-Baden in the old days, and at Monaco, and on the Mississippi boats, for the pleasure of trying my luck. It isn't a worse way of buying amusement than many another. But I find more pleasure sometimes in giving money away; what merit is there in that?'

The morning after the concert he was up rather early. He was restless, and did not feel in the mood for turning to anything in particular. He fancied nothing would do him more

good than a long ramble alone into the country, and he thought of going up the river a certain distance in one of the boats, and then getting out and wandering away along by the banks as far as he pleased. He could either return to town that night or not; or never again, exactly as the humour took him. It was spring, and he thought with a yearning of the budding trees along the river; of the smoke curling up grey against the pale spring sky from cottage-roofs; of canals and towing-paths, and the slow horses heavily tugging at the lazy load; of delightful English downs with long, low, redbrick houses and antique weathercocks, and rooks flying round; of sunlight flickering through the yet unclothed boughs; of boyish holidays, especially of Saturdays. He began to think it would be delightful to keep a lock on the Thames and lie on the grass and do nothing until a boat came up, and then, swinging open the great gate of the lock, to watch the boat as it shot through or dragged heavily through. Or a travelling tinker, he thought, must have a glorious life: slouching along through villages, and having a chat with everybody and doing a bit of work here and there, and sleeping in barns now and then, or, when the weather was very fine, lying down under the open sky and seeing the stars begin to flicker and dance about over his head as he was dropping asleep. Such a fellow would want for nothing and would be welcome everywhere. He would bring news from place to place, and get the gossip of one village to carry on to another. He would come now and then to some fine old historic city, with a cathedral or a castle, and with the open country and the river seen from every one of its streets: and there he would spend a day or two before wandering off on his travels again.

Any manner of wandering seemed charming now to Fielding, and he might have carried out his project of starting on a tramp that day; he might possibly not even have returned to Bolingbroke Place any more; but that the first appearance of the postman there was accompanied by the short note from Gabrielle asking him to call on her. He was delighted; he was made angry; he was embarrassed. It could only, of course, be another attempt to get at all that he knew about Vanthorpe; and there was something in the style of the letter which seemed to his sensitive mood like the command of one who feels herself vastly superior to him whom she addresses. He was for a moment almost in the humour to say that Mrs. Vanthorpe had written to him as if she were ordering a tradesman to come to her and take some commission from her. But he remembered how Gabrielle always looked and spoke; and this thought soon died.

In truth, it is not pleasant to be summoned by a woman with whom one feels himself fast falling in love merely because she wants to ask you about someone else, in whom she feels an interest that she does not feel in you. And then, in order that injustice may not be done to Fielding by making him out wholly concerned about himself, it ought to be said that he greatly feared the tale he had now to tell of the Vanthorpe he knew would hardly make him a welcome messenger.

A tap at his door was followed, almost before he had time to call out inquiry or invitation, by the appearance of Mr. Lefussis.

'I have come to consult you, Fielding, on a matter of great importance, or perhaps I should say of delicacy rather than of importance: a question of propriety.'

'If it is a question of propriety,' Fielding replied, 'you have come, Lefussis, to the right shop; especially if it should happen to be a question of etiquette. Court etiquette I am particularly strong upon. Likewise that of evening parties. I have ceased to study the Complete Guide to the Ball-room, because I have made myself master of its contents, so that I think, in the unhappy event of the work being destroyed, I could supply its place from memory. So you see, Lefussis, in me you have found the very man you wanted. Put out your lantern!'

'I should not have thought of troubling you, Fielding, on matters of such trivial import. You misconceive me, my dear friend, altogether. This is a question of honourable feeling; of the course that is permitted to a gentleman. I have the happiness, Fielding, to be acquainted with men of the highest class our ancient aristocracy has nourished; but this I will say, Fielding—and I have to request, sir, that I may not be interrupted—I will say, sir, even in your presence, that I do not know among those illustrious men anyone whom I believe to have a nicer sense of honour than you have yourself.'

'All right,' said Fielding; 'go ahead.'

'You see that?' and Lefussis tendered a crispy piece of paper to his friend for inspection.

'Regardless,' Fielding answered, 'of the fact that anything I now say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against me, I have no hesitation in admitting, Lefussis, that I do see the object you hold out towards me.'

'You know what it is?'

'There have been melancholy intervals during which the rareness of the sight might make me cautious about pledging myself as to identity. But at the moment I should say it was a ten-pound note.'

'You are right,' said Lefussis with an air of triumph, as if he had been backing Fielding to solve some difficult problem and his friend had been successful. 'Now look at that and tell me what you make of that,' and he handed over another piece of paper.

'This,' Fielding declared, after having calmly surveyed it, 'I take to be an envelope addressed to "Jasper Lefussis, Esquire, 3, Bolingbroke Place, West Centre." Is my interpretation yours, Lefussis?'

'So far, Fielding, you are undoubtedly correct; but you have not gone below the surface. Look on the inside of the envelope, and tell me what you find there.'

Fielding did as he was bidden with a gravity equal to that of Lefussis himself, who never acknowledged, by the faintest smile, the existence of any jest, and possibly never perceived that such a thing had existence. 'I find the words written in a fashion meant, I think, to resemble print: "For Mr. Lefussis; restitution money; a case of conscience."'

'Just so,' and Lefussis patted approvingly Fielding's chest with the back of his lean hand; 'just so. Now comes the question on which I have to ask you, Fielding, as a friend, sincere, I am sure, although recent, to apply all the power of your vigorous intellect and all the keenness of your sense of honour. You have the whole of the evidence in your possession. Such as that document is, the postman has just brought it to me. I know nothing more of it than you do. The question is, am I at liberty to take that money and use it for my own purpose?'

'The question,' Fielding answered, 'does not call for one moment's consideration. Of course you are.'

The eyes of Lefussis brightened.

'This is a case, you will observe,' he said, with a certain diminution of the brightness, 'in which a man is bound to be particularly careful how he trusts to his own impressions. I will not conceal from you, Fielding—I never have concealed from you—the fact that my means are restricted, indeed, very limited; and that the possession of ten pounds is an object to me. But that is the very reason why I must refuse to be guided by any inclinations of my own. Now, to begin with, is this money mine?'

'Of course it is: whose could it be?'

'But by what means has it become my property?'

'I should say the case is clear. The sender declares that he forwards you the money as restitution, as a case of conscience—we can hardly suppose that so sensitively conscientious a person

is telling a lie merely for the purpose of getting rid of a ten-pound note. Scrupulous persons have occasionally overcome their scruples, I believe, to get possession of such things; but the other position, Lefussis, is not one to be maintained. May not someone have borrowed the money from you long ago, or swindled you out of it? From my knowledge of you, Lefussis, I should say that nothing was more probable.'

'Then your decision, as a man of honour, is that I am entitled to keep this money?'

'My decision is that the money is undoubtedly yours.'

'Another question now arises, one of less delicacy, however; rather a question for a practical man of the world. You see this coat, Fielding, that I am now wearing, these garments generally, indeed, and this hat I hold in my hand?'

'I see them,' said Fielding, surveying his friend's exterior with a certain melancholy interest.

'What is your opinion of them generally?'

'I should say,' Fielding answered after proper deliberation, 'that they were very becoming garments in their place—that is to say, in Bolingbroke Place; but that they ought not, if possible, to be displayed outside the limits of that enclosure.'

'Your opinion, Fielding, exactly concurs with my own; but I place greater reliance on yours, because you are a young man, and you observe changes in fashion with a quicker eye than I can pretend to have. The fact is, I have been invited by Major Leven to breakfast with him, and I will own to you that I was a little in doubt about the cut and condition of these clothes. You will remember my expressing that opinion to you with great frankness, on an occasion of another kind two or three days ago, Fielding, my dear friend?'

Fielding remembered it perfectly well.

'Strange, is it not, that just in the nick of time, as one might say, this unknown debtor should turn up?'

Well, yes, Fielding thought it was strange; or, no—he did not see that there was anything particularly strange in it. Yet perhaps, if one turned it over, there really was something a little strange in it. So it was settled between them that the thing was to be considered a little strange. Lefussis went his way in high delight, to buy a suit of ready-made clothes in which to present himself at Major Leven's. 'It's all the more lucky, Fielding,' he said, as he was departing, 'because I have to call at the Foreign Office to-day; Lord Bosworth has promised to give me another interview, although I happen to know, as a matter of fact, that he has declined to see either Granville or

Hartington on the same subject. It is just as well, therefore, that one has a decent coat; it looks better, Fielding, it looks better.'

Fielding was evidently getting himself up with some care for his personal appearance that morning. He took a considerable time in dressing after he had got rid of Lefussis. Likewise he looked with curious dissatisfaction at some of his clothes. 'I'm really not much better than dear old Lefussis,' he thought. 'I had better send myself a trifle of restitution-money, and go and buy a coat or two.' Fielding had somehow been put into good spirits by the visit of Lefussis. He was delighted to have been the means of pleasing 'dear old Lefussis,' and inducing him to buy a new coat, as Charlton had sneeringly suggested that he ought to do before going into respectable society; and he was especially glad that Lefussis had not the faintest suspicion of where the money came from. 'It is restitution-money; it is a matter of conscience,' Fielding told himself; 'I owe something to my own conscience for having made fun of the poor old boy so often, with his Foreign Office and his Lord Bosworth.'

Fielding was standing at his door preparing to go out, when Robert Charlton came down the stairs.

'Going out early?' Charlton observed.

'As you say, early,' Fielding answered; 'that is, for me. I suppose you industrious child of art would consider this rather late.'?

'I am a working man,' Charlton said; 'I have to keep the working-man's hours. Going west?'

'Like the great Orion,' Fielding replied, 'I am sloping slowly to the west.'

'I saw you at the concert yesterday.'

'You didn't seem as if you wanted to see much of me, Charlton. You rather sneaked away, I thought.'

'You seemed to be so agreeably engaged, it would have been a cruelty to intrude myself on you. A charming lady, Mrs. Vanthorpe! Are you going to visit her to-day, perhaps?'

'I am,' Fielding answered with a sudden sternness, strangely unlike his usual manner. 'What then? You go to visit her sometimes, don't you?'

'When she sends for me,' Charlton replied. 'When she wishes me to come to her and take her orders, then I go and take her orders, you understand.'

'Very well,' Fielding said, still in the same tone; 'she has sent for me, and I am going to take her orders.'

'I am very glad to hear it for your sake; she is a very

liberal lady ; and I have no doubt she will remunerate you handsomely for any loss of time you may have on her account.'

Fielding looked at him fixedly as he stood slowly beating one hand against the other and looking up with a curious expression of spiteful slyness. Then good-humour prevailed as usual with Fielding, and he laughed.

'What a discontented malignant old villain you are, to be sure, Charlton !' he said, 'I call you old, because you are awfully old, you know. You never could have been young at any time. I firmly believe you are one of the fairies that get changed for the children of honest mortals. Why do you always go on as if some wrong were being done to you by someone ? I'm not going to cut you out of Mrs. Vanthorpe's patronage ; she wouldn't entrust her pretty work into my clumsy hands, I can assure you.'

'I wish you would not talk of patronage, Fielding—I don't like it. I have told you already no one patronises me.' And Charlton disappeared in sudden anger.

He did not go far, however ; for when Fielding was fairly out of sight, Charlton came back, tried Fielding's door, found it open, and went in. He remained in the room for a long time, rummaging among Fielding's papers, with delicate hands too supple and skilful to make any disturbance ; he opened books, looked at envelopes, and, where he had a chance, read letters. Sometimes he heard a sound outside, and then he started like one caught in a crime, and sprang to the attitude of an uncertain visitor who had casually looked into the room expecting to find its owner there. Not many sounds, however, disturbed those dull stairs and passages, after the hours in the day when most of the lodgers went out to their business. As each alarm that had disturbed Charlton proved false, he went quietly back to his search among the papers. Apparently it was some time before he found anything worth his search. Suddenly, however, he came on something which made him clap his hands together in exultation. It was not in outward seeming a great treasure-trove. It was only a little package of letters, some of which were addressed to 'Mr. Clarkson,' and others to 'Clarkson Selbridge, Esq.,' 'Mr. Clarkson Selbridge,' and simply 'Mr. Selbridge.' All these envelopes bore foreign postmarks ; none of them were addressed to Bolingbroke Place, or to any place in England. Charlton opened some of them. Those he read were for the most part utterly unimportant—at least, they referred apparently to trivial matters of business or social intercourse of which he could make nothing, and a few were in French. It was not, however,

for the contents of the letters that Charlton particularly cared. For aught he knew, they might be concocted on some plan which allowed the merest trivialities to stand for something of unspeakable importance and mystery to the initiated. The point which had interest for him, and made him feel triumphant, was that Fielding had evidently been receiving letters under three different names.

He was satisfied for the present. He put the letters and envelopes carefully back where he had found them. He stopped a moment before opening the door and passing out of the room : suppose anyone should happen to see him ? The blood coloured his thin cheeks at the thought. Suppose someone had seen him go into the room, and noted how long he remained there, and met him as he came out ? He could say, of course, that he had gone in to look for Fielding, and had waited some time in the hope that Fielding would return ; but suppose someone had seen him who was suspicious, and who asked no questions but set in turn to watch him, and found him another time in Fielding's room ? Suppose even some little child saw him, and babbled to other lodgers ? In that melancholy house nearly all the residents were poor. Fielding alone was known to have money sometimes ; everyone knew that he was liberal of his money now and then ; others as well as Charlton might have had an opportunity of observing that he had a costly diamond. Suppose it were to be suspected that Charlton had secreted himself in Fielding's room with the purpose of robbing him ? Charlton turned almost sick at the thought. He felt miserably humbled anyhow by his consciousness of having done a disgraceful thing, in thus creeping into Fielding's room with the base purpose of getting at his secrets ; but he might have overlooked this, and persuaded himself that he was doing right in trying to expose imposture, were it not for the sort of danger in which his conduct might involve himself. Suppose anyone should have watched him going into the room and coming out of it, and that soon after Fielding should be robbed ? He drew back into the room and almost cowered behind the door as he thought of this. But even while he clung nervously to his shelter the idea occurred to him—suppose Fielding should suddenly return now and find him skulking in the room ? This thought was so much more alarming than any other that he hastily pulled the door open and rushed into the passage, to find himself all but confronted with Janet, who was in the act of descending the stairs, and had just reached the turn in the staircase which commanded the spot where her husband stood.

'Why, Robert!' was her surprised exclamation.

'Hush; hold your tongue!' was Charlton's angry utterance—as if he had actually done something which demanded silence; as if the walls might hear.

'Is Mr. Fielding sick?' Janet asked in a low tone and with alarmed expression as she tripped lightly down the stairs and stood beside him. She thought her husband's command of silence must be a caution not to disturb a patient.

'How do I know?'

'Why, because you were in his room, and I thought——'

'I didn't know that you were much given to thinking,' he said, recovering himself a little. 'About Mr. Fielding, perhaps—that might be different. Don't be alarmed; he is not sick; he is quite well; I saw him only a short time ago.'

'I thought you might have been looking for him, in his room,' the unlucky Janet went on unsuspectingly. 'Were you there all the time, Robert?'

'All what time?'

'Since you went out, I mean. Or have you been to the West End and come back already?'

'What I want to know,' Charlton said, 'is what you were doing here, Janet. That's just the thing I shall trouble you to explain, if you have no objection.'

'Why, Robert dear, of course, I was going for the silver wire that you wanted. You told me to go for it—don't you remember?'

'Oh, I remember a great many things, I can assure you,' he replied with an emphasis as though his words contained some terrible significance; 'I don't forget anything, I can assure you. Very well, you can go for the silver wire.'

She went her way, pained and puzzled, but uncomplaining, and wishing the spell of Mrs. Vanthorpe's presence might be tried on Robert soon again. Her husband went half-way up the stairs and then turned down again and cautiously followed his wife at a distance. It was all very well about the silver wire; but what was the meaning of her passing Fielding's door just at that moment, and her asking in such a tone of alarm about Fielding?

He followed poor Janet until he had made it clear even to his mind that she was only going to buy the silver wire, and that as soon as she had got it she returned to her dull home, where she was to remain alone until he should return to keep her company. Charlton had a great deal of work to do that day, some of it pressing in point of time, and some of a very delicate kind

requiring a dexterous manipulation which would in ordinary circumstances have engrossed all his interest. But he did not seem inclined to settle down to work. When he had seen Janet fairly disposed of, he started off for Gabrielle's house, and he took his stand at a convenient corner from which he could see anybody passing out or in. There or thereabout he was determined to stay until he should see Fielding come out. He would follow Fielding then, and see where he went next.

CHAPTER XI.

‘ONE DREAM GOES : ANOTHER GROWS.’

THE lot of the patronised has been pretty often deplored. ‘The patron and the jail’ have been classed together as among the cruellest trials of struggling artistic genius. Perhaps, however, there may be a word to say now and then for the sufferings of the patron. Gabrielle Vanthorpe was not looking at the matter from that point of view; for she was too single-minded and generous even to think of herself as the patron of the gifted young daughter of music who was for the time abiding in her house. But it is certain that the companionship of Miss Elvin the evening after the concert and the next morning had a good deal that was trying in it. Miss Elvin had not returned to her home when the concert was over, as she had declared in the first instance that she must certainly do—for how could her brother exist without her any longer?—she had quietly settled herself at Gabrielle's, and said nothing of departing for the present. She was not satisfied with the result of the concert. The applause she got had not been nearly emphatic enough to make her certain of success. The trial was apparently to make all over again. She had not been noticed much by Lady Honeybell as she was leaving the hall; in fact, as it afterwards turned out, Lady Honeybell, in the confusion and crowd of the breaking up, had scarcely seen the little singer, and did not remember in the least who she was. Mr. Taxal had not presented himself at Gabrielle's house that evening, nor indeed had anyone come there at all; and, so far as any outward appearances were concerned, Miss Elvin might as well never have sung at the concert. She and Gabrielle dined alone, and although Miss Elvin liked her dinner very much, she did not particularly care for a mere *tête-à-tête* with her patroness. She therefore assumed an air of patient despondency; she put on the manner of the unappreciated and the misprized; she refused any con-

soling reassurances of Gabrielle's, and somehow contrived to convey the impression that her comparative failure had come of her having consented to sing at such a place at all, and that her good nature in yielding to the suggestions of Gabrielle and of Mr. Taxal had been the chief cause of her disaster. It now appeared that her brother had always especially disapproved of her singing at charitable concerts where there were any amateurs; and Miss Elvin took frequent occasion of expressing her remorse at having forgotten even in one instance his wise fraternal injunction.

Gabrielle awoke the next morning with a curious sense of oppression and of anxiety. She was some seconds awake before she could quite realise what this sensation meant. By degrees she remembered that she had been seemingly the innocent cause of Miss Elvin's disappointment; and also that she had written to Fielding, asking him to come and see her; and that on that day therefore she was in all probability to learn something about her late husband's brother. Now that the time was so near at hand she felt a little nervous about the news she was to hear; and a little nervous too as to the step she had taken in inviting to a confidential interview a man of whom she knew next to nothing. She had to listen to a good many plaintive expressions of disappointment from Miss Elvin at breakfast. The singer had been awake half the night, longing for morning and the newspapers; and now morning and the newspapers had come and brought with them little contentment. The 'Times' had nothing whatever about the concert; the 'Daily News' coolly announced that owing to a pressure of matter it had been compelled to hold over for that day several musical and dramatic notices; the 'Daily Telegraph' had a short paragraph which did not mention Miss Elvin; the 'Morning Post,' concerned only about Lady Honeybell and the distinguished persons who patronised the independence of Thibet, disposed of the concert in a few words of general praise; the 'Standard' gave the names of the performers, but only said that they all acquitted themselves with their accustomed success, and took no account of the fact that one of them at least was a *débutante* thirsting for success but not yet accustomed to it. 'I am not disappointed; no, not in the least!' Miss Elvin said; 'I knew it would be so; I knew that the conspiracy would pursue me.' Gabrielle did her best to console the young artist; but the consolation was inefficient, partly for the reason that Gabrielle hardly understood what the distressed singer was talking about.

It was a relief when, at an hour unusually early for visitors, she was told that Mr. Fielding was waiting to see her. Ga-

brielle felt, although relieved, a good deal confused too, for she hardly knew what Fielding would think of her invitation, nor was she quite clear on what footing she ought to receive him. It pleased her that he had called at an unusual hour; it showed that he regarded the visit as something in the nature of a matter of business and not an ordinary call made at a lady's house by one of her friends. There was peculiar delicacy, it seemed to her, in Fielding's putting the matter in this way. Still the interview would necessarily be a little out of the common. She thought for a moment of asking the young singer to accompany her to the room where Fielding was waiting; but she dismissed the idea at once. In the first place, Miss Elvin did not seem a very sympathetic person, absorbed as she was now in her own disappointment; and in the next place, Fielding might have some important revelation to make, which ought not to come to the ears of an outsider. Then, again, Gabriello had always scouted the idea that a woman is to be restrained by mere forms and fancies from discharging a serious duty; and was she now to hesitate because the duty involved a quarter of an hour's talk in her own house with a strange man? As she came to the door of the room where Fielding was waiting, she felt, nevertheless, a curious mis-giving, and her heart almost failed her. It came back upon her mind in that instant how she had felt a sensation precisely similar when she was turning into Bolingbroke Place the first day she saw him. It was a tremulous sensation, like a foreboding of something momentous to happen; a sensation vague and sudden as the quick indefinable association of fancies or memories that a chance note of music, the perfume of a flower, or the sparkle of a wave may bring with it, but not like any of these in its impression; something *schauerhaft* and ominous. Gabrielle only stopped for a moment, however, and then shook off the absurd feeling and went in.

There was nothing very *eerie* or ominous to meet her eyes when she entered the room. Only a tall, dark-haired young man leaning with his back to the chimney-piece, not wholly without suggestion of danger to the tiny cups and saucers and other bits of ornament and nick-nack there—perhaps that was the foreboding, Gabrielle thought, as she saw some of her precious trifles thus imperilled. One thing displeased Gabrielle an instant after, she could hardly tell why. As Fielding stood, he had his back to a portrait of Albert Vanthorpe that rested on the chimney-piece, and his figure completely shut out the picture from her eyes.

'Mr. Fielding,' she said, 'I shall make no apology for asking

you to come and see me. You know, I suppose, what an interest I must have in all that concerns the family of my husband—my late husband; and you seem to have known something of a brother of his. You said as much to me yourself, and I heard it from others too.'

Fielding was still standing near the chimney-piece, hat in hand; she had not asked him to sit down. She thought the more formal and business-like the meeting could be made the better. Her manner impressed him disagreeably. He remembered what Charlton had said about her that morning. He only bowed slightly and waited for her to go on with what she had to say. She thought she had said enough, and that it was now for him to speak.

'Well, Mr. Fielding?' she spoke at last with a certain impatience in her tone.

'I beg your pardon; you had not quite finished, I think; I didn't quite understand what you wished me to say.'

'Oh—didn't I understand that you knew something of the brother of Mr. Albert Vanthorpe, the son of the lady we saw at the concert the other day?'

There ought to have been something in the words 'we saw at the concert' to move Fielding. To be made one, even for a second, and in no matter what passing unmeaning way in that 'we,' ought to have been pleasant to his ear. But Fielding had taken a notion into his head which had possession of him. He thought that Gabrielle was treating him *de haut en bas*, as if he were a creature of a different class, sent for to take orders, as Charlton put in. 'She thinks she is talking to Charlton, I suppose,' he thought to himself. He had himself said to Charlton that it would delight him to be patronised by her, or to be trodden on by her; but at that time he did not believe that he was likely to be patronised or trodden on by her.

'I really don't know, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' he said politely, but very coolly, 'whether I ever did meet a son of that lady or not. No name is so uncommon, I suppose, but that there may be persons bearing it who are not related to each other. I am not acquainted with the lady you speak of; how should I know whether I ever met her son?'

'But the very way in which you looked at her that day showed that you took some interest in her.'

'Do you think so? That only shows how ladies may be deceived. I had only one reason for looking at her, and that was because I saw you looking at her. I followed your eyes: and I saw that they turned to a lady in black, and I turned to

the lady in black. That is the whole of that story, I can assure you.'

Gabrielle was at first disposed to feel offended at this way of putting the matter. It seemed like an impertinent compliment. A faint colour came into her face, and she began to wish that she had not asked Mr. Fielding to come and see her. He saw that she was hurt, and he was not sorry for it. He was in rather a savage mood for the moment. Gabrielle recovered herself at once. She had brought the interview on herself, and she was quite equal to going through with it.

'But you spoke,' she said quietly, 'in a manner which led me to believe that you knew something about one who has long been lost sight of, and in whom I feel a great interest naturally. Besides, you asked me yourself whether she still hoped she had a son; his mother, I mean.'

'A very innocent question,' Fielding said.

'Very; in an ordinary case a very unmeaning question, but in this case it seemed to me to have a meaning; and I thought it meant a great deal. It seemed to me to show that you did know something that much concerns his mother.'

'But—excuse me—his mother?'

'You mean that it is his mother's affair and not mine? That would be a fair enough answer to my curiosity if you had not spoken to me on the matter. But since you did——'

'No, no, I don't mean that; I mean that it is not at all certain that that lady is the mother of the Vanthorpe I used to know, since you appear to have heard that I once did know a man of that name.'

'You are only trifling with me, Mr. Fielding; I am afraid I am wasting your time to no purpose. I see now that I had no right to ask you any questions or to ask you to come here. I thought there could be no harm in asking you to tell me something about one who might, at least, turn out to be a near connection of my own. I did not suppose there could be any difficulty in the way; but if there is, I have only to apologise for having put you to all this trouble for nothing. I sometimes do impulsive things; I wish I didn't.'

'So do I,' he said. 'I do impulsive things; I did an impulsive thing when I spoke in any way of all this.'

'I am sorry to have put you to so much trouble,' she said coldly; 'if there is any way in which——'

'In which you can remunerate me for my time and trouble?' he asked—'a money payment, perhaps—so much an hour?'

'I meant nothing of the kind,' Gabrielle answered warmly,

'and you know it very well. I never supposed you were a person to whom one could offer money.'

'When a man is poor,' he said, 'you ladies, I suppose, think he must be looking out for money.'

'But I don't believe you are poor; or if you are, is it not your own fault? Tell me honestly—is it not your own fault? Tell me, am I wrong in speaking to you this way? Am I wrong in not being offended by your words and your rude manner? Is there no reason why I may have a right to speak to you?'

For she was now quite carried out of herself, first by what seemed his confession of poverty, and next by the sudden return of her former impression that he really was her husband's brother, and that he was for that reason alone evading any answer. She made a movement towards him with eyes all lighted by sympathy and hope, and was on the very point of asking him, 'Are you not indeed my husband's brother?' He was simply bewildered by her words and her manner. 'This is the lady-patroness, indeed,' he thought at first. 'She hears that I am poor and at once fancies she is bound to make an offer of service.' He was touched at the same time by the singular kindness of her manner.

'Come,' she said impatiently; 'if you are poor, is it not your own fault?'

'Most bad things that happen to us come of our own fault, I suppose,' he answered slowly. 'I can blame no one but myself for anything bad that has come on me.'

'I thought so; I knew that. Come, tell me honestly—do. I not know more of you than you thought at first?'

'Positively, I don't know.'

'Do I not know already who you are?'

He seemed a little staggered at first by this remarkable homethrust. But he pulled himself together, and although there was a higher colour on his face, he only shook his head and said, with a smile:

'I don't think so, Mrs. Vanthorpe.'

'Your name is not Fielding,' she said abruptly.

'For whom on earth does she take me?' Fielding asked of himself. 'Oh, pardon me,' he said aloud, 'my name is Fielding; I sometimes wish it were not.'

'Your name is Fielding really?'

'Really and truly—what do you suppose it should be?' He was much inclined to ask, 'What would you like it to be?' and to add, 'Tell me, and I will call myself accordingly if it pleases you.'

Gabrielle felt dashed to the very ground. Her castle of cards had toppled down. She had made herself ridiculous in the eyes of an absolute stranger. There was no mistake possible as to the seriousness and genuineness of his reply. His face showed the most utter astonishment when she appealed to him about his name. Her fancy and her impulses had shamefully betrayed her. She could hardly keep the tears from rising in her eyes.

'Mr. Fielding,' she said, 'you must see that I have allowed myself to become the victim of the strangest mistake; it was all my own doing, and I have no one to blame for it. I needn't tell you what it was; I am always making impulsive mistakes; and this is one of them. Will you do me two great favours: first to forgive the trouble I have imposed on you, and next not to try to guess at any explanation?' It was part of Gabrielle's nature to trust herself to anyone, and to believe that she would meet a true man in everybody.

'I saw there was a mistake,' Fielding said, making the least of it purposely. 'You thought I was this missing Vanthorpe? I could wish with all my heart I were, if it could give you any pleasure; it would be turning a good-for-nothing existence to some account. I ought to have spoken out at once, Mrs. Vanthorpe, and then all this mistake would never have come about. But, to speak the truth and shame—my own absurdity, I fancied that you were treating me with contempt for being poor; and that is a sort of thing I can't stand even from a lady.'

'See how wrong you were,' Gabrielle said, brightening. 'I did not think you were poor. On the contrary, I thought—in the lucid intervals when I was not occupied with that other ridiculous idea—I thought you were——'

'Rich, perhaps? and living in Bolingbroke Place for the beauty of the situation and the elegance of the apartments?'

'No, not rich, perhaps, but certainly not poor; I never thought of your being poor.'

'Why not, Mrs. Vanthorpe?'

'I don't really know; you did not seem to me to have the manners of a poor man—you seemed too independent.'

He smiled.

'What you call independence of manner is very often only the surest proof of poverty. It is like the Spanish beggar's ragged mantle, which the more ragged it is the more proudly he draws it around him.'

'At all events,' she said warmly, 'I know you were a gentleman, and I know that still.'

'Thank heaven, bad as we are, we have not yet come to make it a social law that there can't be a poor gentleman.'

'Can nothing be done?' she said simply and very gently. 'You ought not to be poor; you have talents and education, anyone can see that. I have some friends, Mr. Fielding, who perhaps could do something to get a man of talent a way of showing what he can do. If you would only not be so very, very independent—if you would only tell me what you can do, and allow me to speak to one or two friends, why, something might be done.' The conclusion of the sentence was lame, but the feeling which dictated it had wings.

There was something so winning in her sweet kindly way, so winning in the very delicacy which made it difficult for her to bring her sentence to anything like a properly rounded period, that Fielding felt himself really growing into that mood which he had described to Charlton when he vowed that nothing would please him more than to be patronised by her. She saw his hesitation, but in her impulsive way guessed at its cause wrongly.

'Come,' she said, taking courage as he seemed embarrassed; 'I can quite understand you, Mr. Fielding. You are terribly independent, and above all things you don't like, I dare say, taking a helping hand from a woman. But a woman may be a very useful and sensible friend, I can assure you. Come, I have heard many good things of you from Mrs. Charlton, and I owe you some thanks for taking the trouble to come here, and not laughing at my mistake, which would have annoyed me very much. Let me try to serve you if I can. Tell me what you are trying to do in London, and perhaps I may be able to do something to put you in the right way.'

'You are putting me in the right way already.'

'How so, Mr. Fielding?'

'Why, simply by being so kind and taking such an interest in me; is that nothing?'

'Oh, no, that's not much; I take an interest in so many people. I want to be more of a friend than that. I have taken it into my head that you are an artist or an author. Now, I have some friends who know great artists and great authors. Can't I serve you in some way?'

'Will you let me think it over a little before I ask any favour?'

'Surely yes; I should like you to think it over.'

'Then may I come and see you again, when I have thought it over and made up my mind?'

'I shall be pleased to see you at any time, and I feel greatly obliged to you for having taken my offer exactly as it was meant.'

He had grown marvellously sententious, and he seemed under a very cloud of embarrassment. The kinder she was, the more anxious he became to put off telling his Vanthorpe story. He went away almost immediately, and it was only after he had gone that Gabrielle remembered he had not told her a single word about the missing Vanthorpe. In truth, she felt so greatly dashed at the ludicrous bursting of one of her fancy bubbles, that she had not composure enough to remember that other conjectures well worth considering, probabilities well deserving of thought, remained still undisturbed. It was certain that Fielding had known some Vanthorpe, that Fielding had some objection to tell all he knew, and that in Fielding's mind there was some doubt whether Vanthorpe's mother would be glad or sorry if he still lived. Here surely was unexplained mystery enough to satisfy the most romantic young woman that she had something still to find out; and Gabrielle had allowed the one man who knew all about it to go away without explaining a single word. 'What a fool he must think I am! How ridiculous I have made myself! Shall I always make myself ridiculous in this kind of way? Shall I never be able to control any impulse or to act as ordinary human beings act?'

Then again she consoled herself with the reflection that after all she had found out something that no one else had got any clue to—she had found a man who could tell something about the lost Vanthorpe, and it was only the other day that Major Leven had said it would be of great importance for the sake of Mrs. Leven if any trace of the vanished prodigal could be found. It had been Gabrielle's dream to become in some way the benefactress of Mrs. Leven, and now who should say that after all she might not realise her hope by finding out the lost son, and reconciling him and her? Fielding's ominous doubt as to whether the mother of the Vanthorpe he had known would be glad to hear that her son was living, may have been only because the son was poor; some mothers were mean and selfish like that, Gabrielle supposed; but she knew that Mrs. Leven was not one of these; and anyhow poverty was a defect that could be repaired if only the sundered mother and son could be brought together again. On the whole, Gabrielle thought after a while

that she had some right to be reassured, and that she had not made such a bad morning's work of it after all. One thing certain was that she must somehow contrive to see Fielding again. Would it do to ask Major Leven to go to him, and find out all about things? Oh, no, Gabrielle settled, after one or two moments' reflection, that would never do. Fielding might refuse to be communicative if challenged in that formal way. Besides, it was possible, although she hoped only possible in the remotest way, that something had to be told which would shock Mrs. Leven to hear, and then how unfair and wrong to put the responsibility on Major Leven of keeping a secret from his wife! There was no way, Gabrielle convinced herself, of solving all the difficulties, but for her to see Fielding again, and beg him to be explicit, and then act according to her own best judgment—in which, despite any recent mistakes, she still retained much confidence.

In all perplexity or distress it was her way to seclude herself in the room consecrated to the memory of Albert Vanthorpe, and meditate there, and make it her oratory and her shrine, and seek for help and guidance there. She hid herself there now. But her mind was morbidly active that day, and her mood of quick awakened curiosity did not seem suited to such a place. She found her thoughts straying incessantly, tantalizingly, from the associations that the room inspired, away to conjectures as to what story Fielding could have to tell, and how she could contrive decorously to get to confidential speech of him again, and who Fielding was, and what she could do for him, and why he lived in Bolingbroke Place, and what he must have thought of her. It was certain that he was a gentleman and a man of education, she thought; she was sure he must be an artist or an author; artists and authors when they were young were very often poor, she had heard, and lived in regions even less attractive than Bolingbroke Place. In the end, of course, they became splendid successes, those who had real merit in them; they wrote books that all the world read, and all the world ran after them, or they became presidents of the Royal Academy. She was sure Mr. Fielding was just the man to write a great book, or to become President of the Royal Academy. What a glorious career; how sublime a life that which led to such a success; what a great thing to be a man who could put his foot even on the lowest round of such a ladder—and for those who could not pretend to such a career, how glorious to be the means of lending a helping hand in time to that struggling genius whose seraph flight was so often checked by poverty and friendlessness!

If she could thus make her life sublime by assisting such a fight, how happy she should be! She resolved that at least she would try, and that no miserable feminine fear of being misunderstood should bar her purpose. Fielding's very peculiarities of manner seemed the natural expression of the proud independent consciousness of genius. His every word showed that noble scorn of patronage that she knew must be in the soul of each true artist. 'Can I have offended him? Can I have seemed as if I were trying to act the part of an insolent patroness to him?' she thought in alarm and shame; and then it suddenly occurred to her that these feelings were not exactly in harmony with the associations of that solemn sacred chamber, and she abased herself before Albert Vanthorpe's memory. But when she was called out to see some visitor she was not sorry for an excuse to leave the room. She felt like a devotee who has for once detected himself in mere worldly cares and ambitions in the presence of the image of his saint.

CHAPTER XII.

WHERE FIELDING WENT NEXT, AND NEXT.

'I wish I were an artist; I wish I were an author,' was Fielding's thought as he passed from Gabrielle's door, all unconscious of any curious eyes following his movements. 'I wonder could I write a book if I were to try; or paint a picture, or compose an opera? I don't see why I shouldn't write a book—a book of travels, perhaps, or a novel—a sensation novel, and make Bolingbroke Place the scene of some awful mystery or murder. It is just the spot for something of the kind. While I was doing it I could go and see Mrs. Vanthorpe every now and then, and take her opinion about it; and make her think I had no chance of getting anyone to publish it, except through her; and never get it finished; and always have her for my patroness. I might bring poor Vanthorpe into it.

The thought of Vanthorpe broke grimly in on the sweet tantalizing whimsical fancies of the young man. There was a painful reality there which did not harmonise with his dream of some literary Penelope's-web to be kept always going on and never finished under the kindly eyes of Gabrielle Vanthorpe. He lounged listlessly, not well knowing what he was actually doing, towards Kensington Gardens. On the way he passed many a house which he had known, and where he had been welcome in old days; and he fell to thinking of the old days

and the inmates of this house and that, and whether they were alive still, and whether they would remember him or care to see him if they were alive. He began wondering too whether he had really gained much in independence, or experience, or strength, or soul, or anything since he made up his mind in his boyhood to cast in his lot with freedom and to have done with the respectabilities and the conventionalities. He had passed the same houses many a time, even since his latest return to London, and he had not thought about them in such a way, nor moralized about himself and his past career. Why was he moralizing and questioning now?

Major Leven was right. The young man in Bolingbroke Place was the second son of old Sir Jacob Fielding, a great City man of that august class out of whom no one thinks of making a Lord Mayor; a philanthropist who went in for every conceivable good cause, and also for religion and morality. Sir Jacob took the chair at all manner of philanthropic meetings. His cheque-book never failed any virtuous enterprise which was likely to be noticed in the newspapers or to attract the attention of any princely or even ducal person. He was a thoroughly good man in the narrow and what we may call the vulgar sense. He honestly believed that the whole duty of humanity was to be respectable. A once strange product of our curious civilisation, a product now grown too common to attract attention or to call for any comment, is that respectability which has nothing to do with any of the positive virtues of manhood, but accomplishes its mission and earns its title by allowing its name to be put down on a committee-list, and signing away by cheque sums of money which it never misses.

When Jacob Fielding was young he married a woman who was not handsome, but who had a fortune. She had one son whom he called Wilberforce Fielding, and she died soon after. Many years passed away, and Jacob, who was now Sir Jacob with a baronet's title given in reward of his philanthropic cheques, married Miss Selbridge, a young and pretty woman of good family who had no money and whose people talked her into the match. It suited them to have her married to this very rich and highly respectable man; and it suited him, for it gave him at least a sort of left-handed connection with the better society of London. But it did not suit the poor young woman at all. For she had not only a warm heart but an artistic sort of nature which found Sir Jacob's home heavy and dull; and she had a considerable amount of humour which enabled her to see its ludicrous side rather too clearly. She had one

child, the boy whom, in her despite, Sir Jacob would call Clarkson, after one of the heroes of Sir Jacob's own youth ; and it was not long before Clarkson's mother died and left her child to be brought up by Sir Jacob. The young Clarkson never gave satisfaction. He had a great deal of his mother's nature in him, to begin with ; and almost from his very childhood he had got it somehow into his head that she had been the victim of some kind of harsh treatment. This was decidedly a mistake. She had always been treated well by Sir Jacob ; the only wrong done to her being that she was provided with a wealthy match which many other girls, even of family better than hers, would have jumped at. But then she was not like most other girls, and her son turned out not to be like most other young men. He seemed from the first to resent his name and his position. He hated to be called Clarkson ; he did not believe in his father's philanthropy. His brother was too old to be anything like a companion to him. A pious tutor to whom he was assigned for a time deplored the fatal fact that what he called a dreadful modern spirit of analysis had taken possession of Clarkson's mind, which led him to hold nothing sacred from inquiry. Withal he was imperturbably good-humoured. He would not go to either of the great universities. He insisted that the universities destroyed all the fresh manhood of thought ; and to Sir Jacob's mind there could be nothing respectable which had not the hall-mark of the universities denied to his own dissenting younger days. So Clarkson went first to Heidelberg, where he learned Pessimism, and then to Paris, where he took to the Latin Quarter a good deal ; and when he came home he made fun openly of his father's guests, and tried to rouse his elder brother into mutiny against the respectabilities, like himself. He declined to go to church on the Sunday when they were in the country ; for Sir Jacob had long conformed to the Establishment ; and at last he left his father's house altogether. There was no quarrel, at least on his part. He was as sweet-tempered as he was unmanageable. He merely said that the kind of life his father and brother were leading was stifling him, and that he could not stand any more of it.

Sir Jacob was not sorry on the whole when his younger son was fairly gone. The elder son promised to become a very reputable head of a rising county family in time ; and the younger was always making fun of what he politely called playing at aristocracy. These unseemly jests of his were made all the less welcome by the fact that any manner of connection the Fieldings might have with aristocracy came from this irreverent

Clarkson's mother. In many ways it was a relief to the household in town and country when Clarkson was gone. He admired nothing that his father really admired, and that his elder brother was willing for the credit of the family to take on trust. He made caricatures of the paintings by Sir Thomas Lawrence; he was always insinuating that the antique family furniture was bought brand-new in Tottenham Court Road; he laughed at a supposed Raphael which it ought to have been an article of faith to accept as genuine; and he did not care about Zachary Macaulay.

Once or twice at long intervals the good-humoured prodigal returned to London. But he did not visit his father or his brother; and they did not even know of his having been so near to them. He lived where he pleased and as he pleased. He was fond of quoting a line from Savage Landor, about one who 'warmed both hands before the fire of life.' This was evidently what he believed himself to be doing. He liked the ups and downs of life; he found a certain interest in receiving Fortune's buffets as well as her rewards. He was free and happy. He was thousands of miles away from London when he heard of his father's death, and it was very old news when the tidings reached him. Then he was stricken with a sudden and deep penitence. His emotional generous nature drove him into repentance. He had had some strokes of surprising good luck in one of the many speculations into which he successively flung himself in the American States; but he threw up the occupation and hurried home, not particularly knowing what he wanted there. On returning to London he hastened to his father's house, no doubt with some thoughts on the way of that other penitent who once came back to the house of his father. At the very door he saw his brother, Sir Wilberforce Fielding, mounting his horse for a ride in the park. Sir Wilberforce looked at him, but did not recognise him; had not even, it was evident, any faint suspicion of ever having seen him before. Sir Wilberforce looked healthy, rosy, and very happy. The returned prodigal thought his own lamentations and repentances would have seemed ridiculously out of place under such circumstances. He allowed his brother to mount his horse and ride away undisturbed. He felt very much of a stranger in London then. Still, he thought as he was there he might as well stay for a little and see how his brother got on, and whether he was a person at all likely to be touched by a fraternal reconciliation. He went, seeking meanwhile for new sensations, in quest of some odd and interesting spot wherein to establish himself for the moment. Chance took him to Bolingbroke Place

He followed his whim, as he had always done thus far, and settled there as a lodger with the other lodgers. The house looked grim and phantom-haunted, and he thought there ought to be legends there, and odd people and adventures. He loved his fellow-man, not indeed in the philanthropist's sense, although he was always ready to do a good turn for anyone, but in the sense that he liked to talk to any sort of fellow-man or woman, and to be for the moment hail-fellow-well-met with the same. He had 'run' life, as the Americans say, on that principle everywhere, and he had found delight in it. He did not see why he might not find some gratification in Bolingbroke Place too. He soon came to know its inmates and to be fond of them in a certain sense. He really had a strong liking for 'dear old Lefussis,' even while he laughed at him; he thought Janet the best creature in petticoats he had ever known; and he was interested in the blended cleverness and shortsightedness, the vanity, the ill-humours and the aspirations of Robert Charlton. He would, however, probably soon have had enough of all this and have left the place and gone somewhere else, possibly out of London altogether, but for the curious chance that threw in his way a young and handsome woman who bore the name of Vanthorpe. That name had some associations for him; and he was at once compelled to look with interest on the woman who bore it. Among all his varied experiences, he had never yet been really in love.

Robert Charlton had never before had to do with a thoroughly purposeless man. Such a personage it seemed to him he had undertaken to watch and to study when he set himself to follow the mysterious Fielding. Charlton's life had been narrow and monotonous to an almost incredible degree. He had hardly any acquaintances, and no friends. He had always been working hard, and had seen those around him, men and women, working hard too for dear life. It was bewildering to him now beyond measure to notice the movements of Fielding, who, on this trying day, seemed absolutely not to know what to do with himself. Charlton had made up his mind that there must be something wrong about Fielding, and that a clue would be got to a discovery by watching him for a whole day and seeing where he went and what he did. So he watched Fielding into Kensington Gardens, where the idle young man sat by the Round Pond for at least two mortal hours, apparently doing nothing but lazily watching the ripples of the pool and the sportings of the waterfowl. At last Fielding got

up; and Robert, welcoming any change, made haste to follow at a safe distance. But Fielding had not gone far before he stretched himself out on a seat and occupied himself in looking up at the trees and the faint blue of the spring sky. Charlton's life had been all too dull and narrow to allow him to cultivate any taste for grass and trees and skies; and the delicious sense of spring borne in that day on others by the soft west wind had no influence on him. Another hour went by in this fashion. Then Fielding got up and strode away as one who has made up his mind to do something. So indeed he had. It was not all idleness which had held him by the pond and under the trees; he was really thinking something out and making up his mind. He crossed rapidly the range of parks between Oxford Street and Great George Street, and he made for Westminster Bridge. It cost Robert Charlton some trouble to keep up with the tall young man, who seemed now as eager to get on as he had appeared anxious to kill time by idleness before. Across the bridge he went and pierced far into the south side. At last he came to a rather pretty-looking row or terrace of small houses, railed off from the rest of the street. There Fielding went up to a door, and knocked. He only remained a few minutes. He did not go in. Evidently, Charlton thought, the person he sought was not at home. Fielding strode on to Kennington Park, whither too Robert followed him; and there was another long lounge on a seat. Up again, and back to the house in the terrace. The same result apparently. Then Fielding went rapidly northward again. He was not going to wait any longer for the person in the terrace, Charlton thought. Robert lingered long enough to take mental note of the number of the house, and then followed. He came in sight of Fielding as the latter was crossing Westminster Bridge. He followed him into the Pall Mall region, and there Fielding turned into a French *restaurant*. Charlton was tired and very hungry, and would fain have had a morsel to eat, and he became savage in his heart with Fielding for entering the *restaurant*. That was another of Fielding's offences. But Charlton would not turn in anywhere for anything to eat, or give up the chase so soon, although it was now late in the evening and dark. He hung about weary and dispirited to the lowest degree, until, after what seemed to him an almost unending time, Fielding came out. Again he made for the south side, and Charlton felt a glow of new vital power in the encouraging conviction that there really was some business of surpassing importance drawing Fielding to the house in the terrace. With fresh

vigour he followed the chase. The same house; the same result. As Fielding left the door for the third time it occurred to Charlton that he might do something better now than merely follow him. When Fielding had disappeared he went boldly up to the house and knocked, and asked the servant who opened the door if Mr. Stephens—he took the first name that occurred to him—had been there that day? She didn't know, the girl said civilly; a gentleman had called three times, but she didn't know what his name was; she had not been living there long; he came to see Mrs. Clarkson, and Mrs. Clarkson weren't at home. He was coming again to-morrow. Robert said something about an appointment there to meet Mr. Stephens; but he supposed he had mistaken the hour. Did the gentleman who called three times ask for him—Mr. Green—Robert's invention was taxed for a second name on the spur of the moment. No; the gentleman only asked for Mrs. Clarkson. Charlton thanked her for her civility and hurried away. He did not succeed in recovering the track of Fielding any more that evening, but he thought he had got at the beginning of a discovery of some kind. He did not fail to remember that some of the letters he had seen in Fielding's room were addressed to the name of Clarkson. It was evident that Fielding had sometimes passed by the name of Clarkson; and now he was paying three hasty and seemingly anxious visits in one day at the house of a person described as Mrs. Clarkson. Robert had read with keen interest in the papers about men carrying on brilliant and successful swindles by passing off under different names, in different parts of England, and having the assistance of women confederates equally disguised. Why should not this be some instance of the kind? He was convinced that there was some mystery or other connected with that house on the Surrey side, and that he had come upon the track of it. In all the varied workings of conjecture in the human mind we do not know that there is any authentic record of anybody having reason to believe that anybody else is engaged in concealing something, and even for a moment supposing that the concealment has a worthy motive. Yet it ought not to take much observation of life, one would think, to teach us that there are men and women who do sometimes make secrets of what it would only be to their credit to have known. Charlton had in any case a suspicious nature, made more suspicious by his almost solitary, brooding, and unhealthy life. He was not likely to think that there could be any mystery connected with the house on the south side, the

discovery of which would not be to the discredit and the confusion of Fielding.

He felt elate at first because he had got on the path to some mystery. The elation lasted him while he was taking a poor and hasty dinner at a small chop-house near Westminster Bridge, but as he sat there alone, in the dim light of the mean public-room after his trial, he began to think how late it was, and how he had squandered a whole day from the work that in general he loved, as he went wondering what Janet would think of his long absence. He came to think of the possibility of Fielding arriving at Bolingbroke Place before him, and seeing Janet and coming from her unsuspecting lips some expressions of amazement and alarm at that absence. Then he thought of the kind of business to which he had given up so many hours, and how like a silly unskilful was to anything he would once have pictured as so fitting if reputation of a man who aspired to be successful and distinguished, and he began to feel miserably humiliated. He began to think with a kind of horror that he must now henceforth sink down and down. He could not make up his mind for a long time to go home; he shrank from meeting Janet face to face. He wandered through lonely streets and hung over gloomy bridges, and gazed into sad waters, until suddenly the moon rose and made the river look bright, and he found the brightness unbearable and fled from it.

Janet was accustomed to go to bed early and leave her husband sitting up. She usually arranged a small supper for him, and then took herself off at some seemly hour, leaving him to outwatch the Bear if he felt inclined. It seemed to her only the proper and natural thing that a scholar, as she firmly believed her husband to be, should sit up to a late hour and read, unvexed by woman's chatter. But then, when she went to bed, Robert was always in the sitting-room, and there was the genial sense of his presence and his nearness. She could see his lamp full on, or at least could catch its light streaming into the room where she lay; and it was an assurance that her husband was near and was, one might say, keeping her company. More than once when she could not sleep she had glided softly out of bed and crept to the door of the room, and looked in upon him as he read or worked, and she felt happy because he was there and she could look on him. But this night Robert had not come home, and that was a strange thing to her. She had not seen him since the forenoon, and then his manner was strange and hard and she did not understand him. The spell that Mrs. Vanthorpe was to work had clearly not begun to

operate yet; but Robert and she were to spend an evening soon again with Mrs. Vanthorpe, and then, perhaps, something might come of it. So far, almost everything was unsatisfactory. Robert had never been out from his dinner before without Janet's knowing in advance that he was to be absent, and he had never been so late. She remained on beyond her usual time, and then she thought she had better go to bed lest Robert should be angry. So she made him a very neat little supper out of the dinner that he had prepared in vain, and she wrote on a scrap of paper a note perhaps wholly coherent words, 'With Janet's love I am going to bed,' and so left the room. She spent a long time undressing and arranging her hair, the beautiful hair which it used to delight Robert so often to see her unfold and let loose around her shoulders, and which now she was letting loose for the gratification of no one. At last, when she had protracted the process to the utmost reasonable limits, she went to bed and for a while lay awake, looking out on the light of the lamp in the sitting-room as it shone through her doorway. For she had lowered Robert's lamp, and she knew that the moment he came in he would turn it more fully on; and then, even if she had fallen asleep in the meantime, she would know the moment she opened her eyes again if he had come home. Often she closed her eyes and tried to make believe to herself that she was sleeping, and then opened them again in the hope that she might be gladdened by the stronger light, and she was each time disappointed. At last she really did fall asleep, and slept for at least two hours.

On first reawaking she forgot for the moment that Robert was not with her. Then, as consciousness began to struggle against lingering sleep, she thought he must be in the sitting-room; and then she became aware that the light was still low. She jumped out of bed, and, undressed as she was, ran into the sitting-room. The light was still low; Robert was not there. The little meal she had set out for him looked dismally full of ghastly suggestion as it lay there lonely and untasted. She looked at the little clock over the chimneypiece which Robert himself had tinkered at until he made it a very marvel of correct time-keeping, and she found that it was nearly half-past one. Then a reassuring thought occurred to her. Nothing was more likely than that her husband, when returning home, had seen Mr. Fielding's light burning in his room and gone in, and that they were now sitting together talking. The idea reassured her, but she was longing to be convinced that it was the truth. She feared her husband would be angry if she seemed in any way to be

looking after his movements ; and yet she could not remain in the condition of uncertainty which then tormented her. She thought she would go out on the corridor and listen, and perhaps hear their voices—Mr. Fielding often talked out in a very loud pleasant sort of way ; and if she did hear them she would go back to bed contented. She opened her door and peeped out cautiously on the landing, a little astonished at first to find that the stairs were quite bright in the moonlight. She heard nothing, so she went down a few more of the stairs and listened. When she came to the first lobby on her way down, the full moon suddenly looked in upon her through a window, and Janet was almost as much startled as if some ghost had appeared and turned the pale light of its wan eyes upon her. The little start, however, reminded her of other possibilities, and she thought she had better go no lower down then, for it would never do if Mr. Fielding or any other of the lodgers were to come upon her and see her in her night-dress. She hurried back to her room and put on clothes enough to make a colourable presentation of being fully dressed, and then softly went down the stairs again.

She stopped at Fielding's door in much trepidation. She listened, but for a time she could hear no sound except the quick beating of her heart. There was certainly a light inside, for she could see it streaming out under the door, but she could hear no voices. She was all trembling, and in her agitation she caught the handle of the door and it rattled loudly, and she heard some one start up inside. Her terror became unbearable. She was longing to fly from the spot and run madly up the stairs, but she could not move. At that moment the street door opened and her husband entered ; and, in the same instant, the other door opened as well and Fielding stood before her.

'Janet !' Charlton cried, and his face became white and he caught her fiercely by the arm.

'Hullo, what are you two doing here ?' Fielding said, not yet understanding the scene in the least.

'Oh, Robert, I was only looking for you ; I thought you were here,' Janet moaned as she looked in terror into her husband's face and tried to twist herself from the tight clutch of his hand.

'I say, Charlton, take care,' Fielding said ; 'you are hurting your wife. What are you about, man ? Let go her arm.' At the same time Fielding put his hand on Charlton's shoulder. Charlton flung his wife from him and struck at Fielding wildly. Fielding put up his arm and stopped the blow.

'Oh, Mr. Fielding, don't mind him; oh, pray, pray don't!' Janet supplicated. 'He doesn't mean it; he doesn't know what he is doing.' Charlton, a little flushed at the consequences of his passionate outbreak, had fallen back a little, and seemed as if he were standing on the defensive.

'I believe he doesn't, indeed,' said Fielding. 'Don't be afraid, Janet; I shan't harm him. Look here, Charlton; hit one of your own size next, will you, there's a good fellow? Only Janet came between, I might have done you some harm, and I should have been sorry afterwards. And now will you tell me, if you are not mad or drunk, or mad and drunk, what this is all about?'

'I only came to see if you were there, Robert; that indeed,' Janet pleaded piteously, looking up to Charlton's arm she held, with eyes in which simple truth shone, than even terror. Charlton had collected his senses now, was quite satisfied in his own mind that she was speaking the truth.

'Well,' Fielding asked again, 'what is it all about? Have you been drinking more than was good for you, Charlton?'

He spoke with a certain sternness now that made Janet again move between him and her husband.

'It was all a mistake, Fielding,' Charlton said at last, gasping for breath; 'I haven't been drinking, but I came in suddenly and I couldn't imagine what Janet wanted here.'

'What a cad you make of yourself!' Fielding said composedly. 'I begin to think now that a kicking would have done you good. I am almost sorry I didn't follow my first impulse; if you had been a stronger man I would have done it.'

'I was in the wrong, Fielding; I admit it; I can only say that I am sorry and that I apologise.'

'Apologise to your wife,' Fielding said; 'you owe her an apology. When I ask you to apologise to me, you can do so. I have to apologise to you, Mrs. Charlton, for bursting out on you so suddenly and frightening you. I didn't know who was there; I heard some noises, and I have had an odd suspicion lately that people have been coming into my room. I am afraid I frightened you, and I ask you to forgive me.'

He looked handsome and brave and genial, and very like a gentleman then indeed. He must have appeared, even in loyal Janet's eyes, something of a contrast to Robert Charlton, who seemed small, cowering, and confused, and at the same time malign. Fielding bowed to Janet and went into his room, and the dejected pair were left to make their way up the silent stairs

by the light of the moon, the sudden intrusion of whose great white face had so much alarmed Janet.

'I oughtn't to have gone down, Robert,' she began, when they had got into their room; 'I know I oughtn't, and it was all my fault. Only for me this would not have happened; but I did not know where you were, and I was frightened, and I thought perhaps you might be with Mr. Fielding in his room, as you are sometimes, you know; and so I went down, and then——'

The poor little beauty was really alarmed. She did not know what strange mood might show itself in her husband. Perhaps the mood she least expected was that which showed itself. Charlton sat down wearily, and seemed hardly to be listening to what she was saying. At last he lifted his head and spoke to her but without looking at her.

'It isn't any matter, Janet; I mean, I don't blame you; it was all my fault; I don't well know what I was thinking of when I saw you and saw him. Go to bed, dear, now; that's a good girl; go to bed, Janet.'

'I have kept your supper for you; it is your dinner, in fact,' Janet said, trying to look cheerful, and to put off leaving him. She longed now to throw her arms round him and kiss him, so dejected and deserted did he seem.

'Thank you, Janet—thank you. You saw how he treated me?' he said, changing his tone and suddenly looking up.

'Well, Robert dear, you know you lost your temper, and you were very wild, and Mr. Fielding is tall and strong.'

Janet would have said, if she could see her way to it, that Fielding, being attacked without rhyme or reason by her husband, had according to her feminine idea behaved with wonderful forbearance in not employing his superior strength at once against his assailant. But, although she never could quite get at the man's point of view for most things, she had a sort of suspicion that Robert would not care to hear much about forbearance of this kind. Still, it did seem to her that it was altogether Robert who had treated Mr. Fielding badly, not Mr. Fielding who had thus treated Robert.

'He didn't strike at me in return; you saw that?'

'Yes, I saw that, of course,' Janet said eagerly, rejoicing in the belief that her husband was after all looking at the thing in the right light, and about to launch into a panegyric on Fielding's magnanimity.

'Yes, of course you saw it,' Charlton said bitterly; 'and you heard too that he wouldn't receive an apology from me! You know why, I suppose?'

'Because he know you didn't mean anything, Robert——'

'Because he considers me a cad ; because he looks on me as beneath his notice, because I am not strong enough for him to strike, nor enough of a gentleman to be asked for an apology ! Oh yes, he thinks to degrade me in my own eyes and—and in your eyes, I dare say—yes, I dare say in your eyes——'

'Oh, Robert : ' and Janet attempted a caress of assurance that nothing could degrade him in her eyes. If she had said that no one but himself could do it, and hardly even he, it would have been only a truthful expression of the poor soul's loyalty. He put away the caress.

'Yes ; it was done to degrade me in—everybody's eyes ; I dare say he will tell it to—everybody. How can I look—anybody in the face again ?'

'But, Robert, who will know ? There was nobody there ; the people in the house were all in bed——'

'I wasn't thinking of the people in the house,' he caught her up almost fiercely. His quiet and broken mood seemed to be passing away.

Janet could do anything but restrain herself from trying to put things right where so useful an operation seemed to be within her power. She said in a soothing tone :

'But, Robert, we don't know any body out of the house except my aunt, and Mrs. Vanthorpe—and Mrs. Vanthorpe wouldn't care, you know, even if she did hear of it—which she won't.'

'Who is he,' Charlton said, jumping up, 'to give himself airs, I should like to know, and put on the ways of a gentleman, and think he has a right to call on people, on an equality, and not like me, taking orders for work ? Who is he that has a right to degrade a man as good as himself in the eyes of—of people ? I'll find out what he is—I'll show the world what he is. I'm on his track ; I'll not fail, that I can tell him. I'll take down the pride of my gentleman. I have not had my suspicions for nothing. I'm glad I struck him. He can't deny that. Go to bed, Janet, it's no fault of yours. You are a good girl, much too good—never mind, only go to bed just now.'

Poor Janet could do nothing but creep to bed and feel very miserable. She did not go to sleep, but lay wondering why things all seemed to turn out so unpleasantly. She was uneasy about Robert's change of mood, and once she stole out of bed and peeped into the room where he sat. He had his head in his hands, and he was crying ; positively crying, like a child or a woman. Never before in her life had Janet thought of the

possibility of a man crying for anything but perhaps the death of someone he loved. She ran to her husband and flung herself on the ground at his knees and clasped him in her arms, and begged of him in sobbing tones to tell her what was the matter.

'The matter is,' he said at last, 'that I am a fool, Janet, and not like myself to-night. I ought to apologise to you for putting you out so, and I do apologise, Janet. You won't refuse to accept my apology, will you?'

They had no more trouble for that night; but Gabrielle Vanthorpe's spell did not seem thus far to be working with great success for the happiness of the Charltons.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HOUSE ON THE SURREY SIDE.

NEXT day, Fielding set out again for the house on the Surrey side. He had made up his mind to have some good reason for telling Gabrielle all that he knew about her husband's brother, or for telling her nothing.

No doubt was now on his mind that the Vanthorpe he had known was the brother of Albert Vanthorpe. It was in Vera Cruz he first met the young Englishman, Philip Vanthorpe. They were drawn together first by their kinship of race, and afterwards by something kindred in character and in their personal history. Vanthorpe was not long without telling Fielding that he had left his home when a mere boy, simply because he could not get on with his mother, and did not like his domestic life. Vanthorpe seemed in many respects a deeper and darker copy of Fielding: the traits of the outlaw were more harshly marked in him; and he had not Fielding's bright companionable careless ways, and his sunny temper. They became close friends, and made many mining, hunting, and other enterprises together. Vanthorpe still intended to go back and live in England some time; Fielding had no purpose of any kind. Vanthorpe told Fielding he was resolved to change his name, and did not know what other to take. 'Take my first name,' said Fielding. 'I don't want it; I never liked it, but it has brought you and me together, for I might never have left my father if he had not called me Clarkson.' The humour of the thing pleased both of them, and Philip Vanthorpe became thenceforward Philip Clarkson.

They were separated for a time, but they met again in New Orleans. A great change had taken place in Vanthorpe's

fortunes; he had married an adventuress from Europe. Some said she had been a music-hall singer; others that she had been a barmaid in a London public-house. Fielding could easily see that she was low London, anyhow. She was handsome, vulgar, very coquettish, and very clever in a sort of way. Vanthorpe had married her in a moment of wild admiration; she made him very miserable; he was repenting at leisure, and now told Fielding that his mind was made up; that he never would return to England. He grew melancholy and penitent; he began to think with regret of his home and his younger brother Albert, and even of the mother with whom he had quarrelled; but he would not attempt any reconciliation now. He was never very robust in constitution, and his present life was telling heavily on him. He and his wife had one child, a boy. After a while Fielding left the Southern States, not expecting ever to see Vanthorpe again. He gave Vanthorpe an address in London which would always find him. The very day of the concert at Lady Honeybell's, and after he had seen Gabrielle there, Fielding received a letter from 'Paulina Clarkson,' telling him that her husband had been some months dead, and that she had come to London with her son for the purpose of finding out her husband's family.

The news of poor Vanthorpe's death was not much of a surprise. Fielding might have expected such an announcement soon. Nor under the circumstances was it wholly painful. It was better perhaps thus than later. But the coming of Vanthorpe's wife to London made it very hard for Fielding to know how to meet Gabrielle's questions, and helped to render his visit to her at her house specially embarrassing. After he had left Gabrielle he made up his mind to a course which he tried to follow that day; as we know, Robert Charlton watched him. He failed in seeing the lady who signed herself Paulina Clarkson that day, and now he is making another attempt. This time he is successful. Mrs. Clarkson was at home. He was shown into a little parlour decorated with a mirror the gilt frame whereof was veiled in yellow gauze, and with engravings of the 'Seasons' and of the capture of Delhi, the elephants being specially prominent in the latter work of art, as if they were dignified authorities directing and inspecting the capture. Fielding stood there thinking of the very different meeting which he was expecting only the day before while he waited for Gabrielle, and looking forward with much dislike to that now about to open. He had to wait a considerable time; and then at last he was privileged to hear a mighty rushing of silken

skirts down the narrow staircase, and a tall woman with a long train occupied rather than entered the little room.

She was very tall; she had been very handsome; she was no longer quite young, but she still kept up a tolerable—perhaps it would be proper to say a colourable—imitation of youth. Her hair was now dark brown, but had evidently undergone occasional changes of hue. She had a very long neck, and, for all her fine figure, occasionally reminded one of a rocking-horse, and occasionally of a giraffe. She had splendid arms, and her sleeves were made loose in order to do them justice. Fielding's first thought, on seeing her, was to wonder grimly how Gabrielle Vanthorpe would like her sister-in-law. Perhaps it was this thought that made him stand silent after the lady had entered the room and show no great joy at seeing her.

'Why, Fielding, how you have changed!' was her first greeting, and she held out both hands to him. He merely touched one.

'You don't seem very glad to see me, Mr. Fielding.' She drew close beside him as he stood near the chimneypiece, and tried to fix him with her eyes.

'I don't think I am particularly glad to see you.'

'I have a name, Fielding, haven't I?'

'I beg your pardon; Mrs. Clarkson.'

'Mrs. Clarkson! Why not Paulina?'

'Stuff!' was Fielding's ungracious answer. 'I never called you Paulina in my life.' He was almost inclined to add, 'and I don't believe your godfathers and godmothers did either.'

'My husband is dead,' she said. 'You were his friend; you might be a little more kind to his widow.'

In truth, it was Fielding's memory of Vanthorpe and of their friendship that made him harsh to the woman now before him. He put on a less ungenial manner, however, and heard her tell the story of Vanthorpe's death, which, with a prudent preparation against possible scepticism, she had had attested by formal certificates. She told how he had left but little money, and a few gold chains and ornaments and jewels, and how she had made up her mind to come to London, and find out his people, and see if they would not receive her. The story was long, and was interrupted by many little outbursts of emotion, and the exhibition of a good deal of impatience and anger. She saw that Fielding did not believe in her tears and her professed grief for her husband, and she occasionally told him so with renewed protestations and outbursts of anger, and now and then

an oath. All the time he was thinking—‘How can I allow this creature and *her* to come together?’

‘Well, Mr. Fielding,’ she said at last, ‘why don’t you say something? I have told you all my story; you used to have talk enough, I remember, when you liked it. Can’t you say something now that you know what I want of you?’

‘I wish you had not come to London at all,’ he said. ‘I cannot see why you did come. Why didn’t you remain where you were known, and where you must have had some friends?’

‘What friends could a widowed woman have like her husband’s mother? Haven’t I got great folks for relations? Ain’t they bound to do something for me and for his child? Come, Mr. Fielding, I ask you that. You think yourself very clever. Just you explain that to me: why shouldn’t I seek out my husband’s mother and his family?’

‘But you don’t know who they are, or where they are, and you are not likely to know from me, unless under conditions such as it seems to me right to impose on you.’

‘You would impose on me fast enough, I dare say,’ she said, affecting to misunderstand his words. ‘But you are not likely to do that, Mr. Fielding, with all your knowledge. I mayn’t have much book-learning, but I am not to be imposed on by any fine talk.’

‘All the same, you can’t help yourself.’

‘I don’t know, Mr. Fielding; that remains to be seen. I know very well that my husband’s name wasn’t Clarkson.’

‘Yes, of course you know that; there never was much of a secret made about that.’

‘I dare say I could change the name soon enough if I wanted to,’ she said, turning to the looking-glass.

He caught at the words.

‘That is just one reason why I came here to-day,’ he said, ‘and why I spent so much time in looking you up yesterday. I took it for granted that you would be trying for a husband in London. Now, I am not particularly fond of flattering women—’

‘You certainly never were fond of flattering me,’ she interposed, with a little shrilly laugh.

‘Very good. Then I may have the less hesitation in saying that you are quite attractive and young enough to have a good chance of getting someone to fall in love with you—’

‘Positively a compliment, and from Mr. Fielding—the first he ever paid me. I like it, Fielding, I can assure you.’ A flush of gratified vanity passed over her face. She looked

natural for the first moment during their talk. That touch of nature that makes the whole world kin is not spoken of by the poet tenderly or pathetically, as those who quote from him generally seem to think, but only in irony. Such a touch of nature as Shakespeare's Ulysses meant to describe now made this woman kin to many better and some worse of her sex. She forgot her affectation, and her deceits, and her habitual perfidy, in the little instant of unexpected gratification to her vanity.

Fielding went steadily on.

'And I should think you don't want to be always encumbered with a child. A man may be willing to marry a widow who would think twice before taking her if he had to take a child as well. You know that, I suppose?'

'Mr. Fielding, what a low opinion of human nature you must have! You quite astonish me.' The affectation had all come back again.

'Well, what I have to say is this. If I can arrange to have your husband's child taken care of by his people, will you give it up? Will you go away, or get married, and not trouble them?'

'I do declare, Fielding, you have positively no feeling. Do you think a mother's heart is like that?'

'You needn't try any of that on me,' Fielding answered. 'Keep it for the new admirer, whoever he is. It may take him in; it hasn't the least effect on me. I know that you would rather have your own comfort and your own way than all the children in the world. Your husband knew that as well as I do. He knew that you didn't care twopence for the child as compared with yourself and your own pleasures.'

'Well,' she said composedly, 'I never went in for much of the sentimental; that's true enough. But I don't quite see why the child should be taken away from me. Why can't they receive us both—me and the child?'

'They may receive you both if they like; I have no control over that. But what I say is, that I will have nothing to do with introducing you to them; and that I don't think you are the sort of person to have the bringing up of your husband's child. You know very well whether he thought so.'

'I know he didn't think so, and I know who put him up to it. I know who was always talking against me. It was you, Fielding; it was you. You never saw anything good in me. You were always putting him against me. Was that manly conduct, Mr. Fielding, I ask of you? Was that like a man?—you who are always talking so fine about right and wrong, and this, that, and the other! Was it, I want to know?'

She was angry now, and the affectation was gone again. A touch of nature of another kind was illustrating the universal kinship. She looked much handsomer when angry than she did when affecting genteel indifference.

'I never spoke to him against you,' Fielding said, 'and you know that well enough. It was by my advice that he did not take his child and leave you long ago; and I don't know now whether my advice wasn't a mistake. I didn't think very badly of you then; I thought you were heartless and vain——'

'Oh, dear me, what compliments! What a nice way for a gentleman to speak to a lady!'

'But that was all I thought of you. I saw you after trying to establish a flirtation over his sick bed with the doctor who was attending him. You were ready to make love to anyone behind his back; you won't deny that to me, I suppose?'

She grew pale with anger.

'Mr. Fielding, your conduct is most ungentlemanlike, I must say. A gentleman never makes such allusions as that. If a lady takes a foolish liking, out of a mere whim, not meaning any harm, it's a compliment to a gentleman; and no gentlemen ever thinks of throwing it in her face. I never before was treated so in all——'

'In all your experiences?'

'No, I wasn't going to say that: I hardly know what I was going to say, you put one out so. Anyhow, it ain't the part of a gentleman; oh, there, I mean it isn't the part of a gentleman, and that I will say. But it's no use bringing up all these old stories, and quarrelling over things. Why can't we be friends, Fielding? Why must you be my enemy?'

'I am not your enemy,' Fielding said more gently. 'I would serve you if I could, for the sake of old acquaintance, and for the sake of your husband, who was my friend. I felt a strong friendship for him. I could not be your friend, for you know that I think you spoiled his life, and that only for you he would have been happy, and might be alive now. But I want to help you, if I can; and the offer I make is a proof of it.'

'An offer to take away my child from me?'

'You don't care about the child; and you know you are not the person to bring up a child. Come: I am not acting the part of an enemy to you. Think this over, and I'll come again; but remember, you can only get to know your husband's name, or anything about him, through me.'

She dropped into a chair, and folded her arms, and looked up at him with saucy half-closed eyes.

'Mr. Fielding,' she said, 'just you listen. 'I ain't quite come to that yet. When all else fails, and I haven't any other hope left of finding out my husband's people, then I may talk to you about your terms. But for the present I don't see any necessity. I am only just beginning, don't you know; and there are lots of ways of finding out things in London; and there's no end of chances and strokes of good luck and what not, and I can wait a little. I may not want your help at all. If I find out the people, I am quite clever enough to play a goody-goody part, if that suits them; and I won't tell any stories on myself, you may be sure. I mayn't be as clever as you, Mr. Fielding; but I'm clever enough to know that the game isn't exactly played out yet. So that's my answer, Mr. Fielding, and I hope you'll not consider me rude.'

They were both playing a game of brag. Fielding was not so confident as he professed to be about the impossibility of her finding out her husband's people except through him. She was less confident about the chances of her being able to do without him than she would have admitted. She looked at his composed face, and a wave of passion darkened her whole expression. She suddenly changed her manner of affected contempt and carelessness for one of intense anger.

'Fielding,' she said, jumping up from her chair, 'I sometimes think I hate you: I do hate you.'

'I don't mind,' he said; 'I am not trying to injure you.'

'You are trying to injure me; you hate me, and you always did. You had better take care.'

At this moment the servant entered, bringing a little tray with some cups and saucers, and went out again. Paulina came over to Fielding, and touched him on the arm, and spoke with an odd affected laugh:

'I am going to have a cup of tea; I am quite the lady, Fielding, as you see; I must have my afternoon tea. I mix it after a fashion of my own; quite particular. You will have a cup, won't you, for old acquaintance' sake, and because we are so very friendly together and so fond of one another?'

She had moved a little away, and was standing now with her side turned to him, and was engaged in mixing the tea at a small table close to the wall. He could not see her preparations, but a faint peculiar smell was perceptible which was certainly not familiar to Fielding in connection with the making of tea.

'See,' she said, turning towards him, 'I have poured a cup for you. It can't be a cup of kindness, I suppose, as the song says; but it may be a cup of unkindness. Anyhow, you won't refuse a lady, I'm sure, Mr. Fielding.'

For a moment it occurred to Fielding that she might have taken it into her head to poison him; perhaps even to poison herself at the same time. He rejected both ideas in a moment, for what seemed to him good reasons.

'You don't like to drink it? You are afraid?' she said, with a laugh.

'I shall never get any good of her if she thinks she can make me afraid of her,' Fielding thought. 'Thank you,' he replied; 'I like tea at all times; I was going to ask you to give me a cup.'

'Indeed! and of my own particular mixture?' She still held the cup in her hand, as if playing with his feelings.

'Any mixture you like,' he answered carelessly. 'I have drunk all sorts of decoctions for tea in all sorts of places. I am sure yours will be far more agreeable than most of them.'

'Perhaps you won't find it so; perhaps you won't like it quite so much as you imagine.'

'Oh, yes, thank you; I am sure I shall like it well enough.' He stretched his hand out for the cup.

'I ought to drink first, I suppose, being the lady,' she said. 'But as you are the guest and the stranger, Fielding, perhaps you will lead the way?'

'Certainly, if you wish it. True politeness consists, I have always heard, in pleasing one's hostess.'

'You really will have it?' She fixed her eyes so keenly on him that he could see the pupils contracting. He took the cup from her hand and bowed to her. The eyes were still fastened on him. He drank the tea. It had a somewhat peculiar perfume, but no peculiarity of taste.

'What would you say if I told you there was poison in that?' she asked.

'Say I didn't believe it,' Fielding answered composedly as he handed back the cup.

'You are not afraid?'

'Not the least in the world.'

'Let me feel your pulse.'

He stretched out his wrist to her. She felt his pulse carefully, all the time keeping her eyes maliciously fixed on him. Then she dropped his hand.

'It's all right enough,' she said. 'You don't seem to be put out at all. Yet, I suppose you wouldn't much like to be poisoned, would you?'

'No, I shouldn't like to be poisoned. First of all, I like being alive; next, I fancy all poisons are more or less painful. But I am not a bit afraid of being poisoned by you just now.'

'Why not? Do you think I am too sweet and good for such a thing? If so, Mr. Fielding, you do me too much honour.'

'Not I; you know very well I don't think you too sweet and good to do anything that could be done safely and with any advantage to yourself. But it wouldn't be quite safe perhaps to poison anyone in London; and besides, you have still some hope of getting at your husband's people through me; and if you were to poison me your only chance would be gone.'

She laughed. 'You are a clever fellow, Fielding; I always said so. I always liked you, although you never liked me. No; I was not trying to poison you; I was only trying to put you into a fright. The stuff that smelt so in the cup had no harm in it. I may poison somebody some day, perhaps—I may poison myself, as like as not—but not just yet. I am not so much down upon my luck as all that. I ain't quite an old woman yet, Mr. Fielding. I mean, I am not quite an old woman. Don't you remember what fun you and Phil used to make of me for saying "I ain't"? I am trying to be quite genteel now.'

'I remember Clarkson trying to cure you of many bad habits,' Fielding said sternly; 'I am glad if he succeeded in any of his attempts.'

'My! aren't we severe? Well, as I was saying, Mr. Fielding, when you interrupted me—rudely, too, for such a teacher of politeness—I'm not quite an old woman yet,' and she glanced coquettishly at the mirror over the chimneypiece. 'There are persons who might admire me yet, although Mr. Fielding don't—I mean, does not. Some people find a young widow very attractive, eh, Mr. Fielding?'

Fielding's eyebrows involuntarily contracted. There was something in the words that grated on his ear. They sounded like the hint of a blasphemy. She was quick to see that her unmeaning words had hit him somehow.

'Well, if I don't think you must be in love with a young widow yourself! I've made a hit, have I? I shall be jealous presently, Mr. Fielding.'

Fielding recovered his composure.

'Very well,' he said, and he prepared to go away; 'find out without me if you can.'

'All right,' she answered with seeming carelessness; 'keep the secret from me, Master Fielding, if you can.'

'I shall not come any more unless you send for me, and perhaps not even then. Remember that.'

'My compliments to the pretty widow. I'm sure there is a pretty widow,' was her somewhat irrelevant reply. She was in a mocking humour now, and he knew it, and he saw that nothing was to be gained for his purpose by any further talk.

When Fielding had gone she abandoned herself deliberately to a frantic outburst of passion. She cried, she laughed hysterically, she stamped; she seized a bonnet that lay on a table and flung it on the floor and trod upon it again and again, she threw herself on the sofa, and that not appearing to be relief enough, she threw herself on the ground and writhed and wallowed there as if she were in tortures of bodily pain. When at last she got up her hair was all loose about her shoulders; her dress, which she had torn and clutched at in her frenzy, was disordered; but she seemed to have recovered some self-control. She looked in the glass, and indulged in a sharp little laugh.

'My! what a fright I am, 'were her first words. 'There, that's done me good; I'm better now.'

She began putting up her hair before the glass, and she talked to herself meanwhile.

'No, Master Fielding, you are very clever, I dare say, but you don't get over me quite so soon or so easy. If they are so very anxious to get rid of me, all the worse for them, and all the better for me. I do believe there is some widow that my fine Master Fielding is looking after. I think I made a hit there. I hate her whoever she is, and I hate him too.'

There were some symptoms of a renewal of the passion-fit at these words; but the woman shook her shoulders and said vehemently, 'No, I won't,' as if she were compelling her temper to give a command to itself; and she kept her word, and did not break out again. Nearly half an hour had passed in her fever fit and her recovery; and just then the maid came and told her that a gentleman who had been there the day before had come again, and was asking after another gentleman who he said had made an appointment to meet him there.

'You fool, there has no gentleman made any appointment here,' she answered angrily. 'Don't you know that as well as I do? Go and tell him so; send him out of that. . . . No, don't,' she said suddenly, bethinking her that it might be some one who knew Fielding. 'No, don't, Annie; I'll see him. Let him wait a moment.'

She ran upstairs to repair the ravages that her passionate mood had made in her hair, her eyes, and her dress; and Robert Charlton was shown into the sitting-room. He was

looking very nervous and uneasy. His thin hands trembled, and he could hardly keep his lips steady. He had followed Fielding, had seen him enter the house, and waited until Fielding came out and disappeared. Then he presented himself with his story about an appointment with a gentleman there. He was determined if possible to get to speech of the mysterious Mrs. Clarkson; and now that his desire was about to be so easily accomplished his heart was failing him. If he could have got out of the place at once he would; only, no doubt, to find his determination to see the adventure through return the moment he had crossed the threshold outward. He was still thinking what he should say, when he heard a great rustling and trailing of silks, in itself enough to make a timid man dread the coming interview; and in a moment Mrs. Clarkson swept into the room, and bewildered him with a low curtsy and a glance from her glittering eyes. The lady was not impressed by the appearance of her visitor. He looked mean, and small, and frightened. His nervous agitation showed her, however, that he was not an ordinary visitor come on everyday business. To Charlton she seemed a most formidable personage. She was decidedly taller than he; and with a silk dress that clung to her figure and showed every movement of her limbs, and trailed a yard behind her on the ground, she appeared like some siren or sorceress, or other supernatural and unmanageable creature. If there was one thing more than another that Charlton shrunk from, it was talking to a woman taller than himself. He was wretchedly sensitive about his short stature, and was not fond of coming into comparison with tall men; but to stand beside a tall woman filled him with a sense of unspeakable humiliation.

She did not relieve his embarrassment by saying anything, but allowed him to begin his story as he would. He dropped all his little fable about the appointment, and stammered out that he was very anxious to know if it was a Mr. Fielding he had seen coming out of the house a short time before. To say the truth, he fully expected to hear that Fielding was known by some other name there.

Yes, she answered graciously; that was Mr. Fielding: did he know him? Did he wish to see him? Mr. Fielding did not live there; he was only an acquaintance. He very seldom came. What did he wish to know about Mr. Fielding?

'If his name is Fielding,' Charlton said, driven to his wits' end, and assured by a sudden instinct that he could thus excite her curiosity. He was right.

'Do you know him by any other name? Does anybody?' she asked sharply.

'I have reason to think he has been known by other names,' Charlton said, becoming a little more composed.

'I should like to know all about him,' she said eagerly. 'I only knew him as Fielding. We knew him in New Orleans and other places in America, my husband and I—my husband is dead now.'

'Oh,' Charlton said, a sort of light breaking in on him. 'Then, your name is Vanthorpe, isn't it? Your husband's name was Vanthorpe.'

'My husband's name was Clarkson; at least, I only knew him as Clarkson. What name did you say?'

'Vanthorpe. Fielding told me of a young man he knew in the South whose name was Vanthorpe, and who was an Englishman of good family—and little wild, and all that; and there was some mystery or other about him; and I fancy he has relations here in London; and Fielding knows them.'

The tall woman caught him by both hands with a sudden energy that almost frightened him.

'You are the very man I want,' she exclaimed. 'I say, what good angel sent you here? Sit down; tell me all about them. I have come to London express to find them out; and Fielding won't tell me. I say, is any one of them a young widow?'

'There's Mrs. Vanthorpe,' Charlton said, not without feeling his cheeks tingle with shame; 'Gabrielle her name is.'

'Gabrielle? Indeed! Is she a widow? and young?'

'She is a widow, and young.'

'Handsome?'

'Very handsome.'

She clapped her hands together.

'I thought so—I knew it! Well, look here; tell me, who is she?'

'Who is she?'

'Just so, exactly. Who is she? What is she to me? She is one of the family, you say?'

'Oh, yes! I understand. Well, if your husband really was the Vanthorpe Fielding knew——'

'He was, I tell you; he must have been.'

'Then this Mrs. Vanthorpe must be your husband's sister-in-law. She was married to your husband's brother; he is dead this year or more.'

'Gracious! well, I never! She is my sister-in-law; shan't we be such friends! Now, Master Fielding, with all your

cleverness, you shall find me a great deal too many for you. Now, look here, my friend: what do you want in all this? You can do me no end of good, but I want to see exactly who you are and why you come here. I don't suppose *you* are after the young widow, are you? Come, tell me out your motive like a man! You are in my power already, you know. I could tell Fielding. Come, what's your little game? You may trust me; I have had many a secret told to me before now.'

Charlton began to feel himself in the position of one who has sold his life to utter degradation, and who must only go down and down farther into the depths. Step by step he had been descending since the unlucky hour when he first thought of searching among Fielding's papers. He was now entered as a regular accomplice in a vile plot of some kind with a woman who already, after ten minutes' conversation, told him she had him in her power. For aught he could tell, she might have it in her will and her power to murder him. Like most hard-working Londoners, he knew little of any quarter of London but his own, and he had a vague impression that somewhere on the Surrey side all the robberies, swindles, and murders were planned and prepared. With a sense of indescribable humiliation he gave the woman to understand that he had suspected Fielding of some mysterious and lawless goings-on, that he had quarrelled with Fielding, and been insulted by him, and that he had set himself to watch Fielding in order to find out all about him. When he had done his story he felt as though earth did not contain in all its unnumbered springs of running water enough of the pure fluid to wash him clean of stain again.

'All right,' said she, 'you'll do,' when she had got out of him every scrap of information he could give. 'Do you want to make money out of this?'

He told her in anger—his anger gave him momentary courage—that he did not want to make money, and she was amused at his earnestness. She asked him for his address, saying she might want him again. He hesitated and faltered, but she reminded him that she could tell Fielding the whole story, and put Fielding up to find him out, and the miserable Charlton gave her his address, and had to explain to her who he was, and how he came to know Fielding, and about his occupation, and about his having a wife.

'If I should want you, and you don't come at once,' she said, with a laugh, and greatly enjoying his wretchedness, 'I can go and call on your wife, you know, and have a talk with

her over the whole affair. Of course you have no secrets from your wife; I may open my mind to her?'

Charlton saw that she despised him and was making sport of him. He left her, and turned homewards, with a sickening sensation as if he were some contaminated wretch unfit to come near the dwellings of wholesome men. As he crossed Westminster Bridge, and looked at the dark water, he thought for a moment that if it were not for Janet he would drown himself, and then it came on him in bitterness that it would be almost better for Janet if he were lying dead under that water; but he only hurried from the sight of the river. It was too dark and fearful; he had not the courage to look on it any longer.

CHAPTER XIV.

'A FRIEND TO HER FRIEND.'

MUCH happiness had come to Miss Elvin. Lady Honeybell had called on Gabrielle, and had been very kind to the young singer, and had even asked her to pass a few days at her house. Miss Elvin, in high delight, had gone home to Camberwell, to make preparations for accepting this momentous invitation; Lady Honeybell had even been gracious enough to say that Professor Elvin must also come and see her. Mr. Taxal, too, had called more than once, and been very friendly. The singer began to see life like the opening of the bright transformation scene in the pantomime.

Lady Honeybell's chief motive in her act of kindness was to oblige Gabrielle, for whom she had taken a sudden but very strong regard. Gabrielle's story had touched her in the beginning, and now she was charmed with Gabrielle herself. She did not, in truth, much like the little singer so far, but she thought it would at the worst be a good thing to take her off that poor dear young Mrs. Vanthorpe's hands.

The new change opening for Miss Elvin made Gabrielle feel relieved and happy; she had time to think of other objects of interest—of Claudia Lemuel, who declined to be called 'Miss; ' of Janet Charlton; and of Fielding, and his untold story about Albert's brother, and the sort of mystery about himself. One morning, therefore, Gabrielle set out for Bolingbroke Place. She had looked up some new and particularly dainty work for Charlton to do, and she wanted to have some friendly talk with Janet if Charlton should happen to be out of the way. It was a bright pure day, pure even in London—one

of those tantalising days which come as spring is softening into summer, and which seem to bear the very essence of immortal summer on their breath. It was a day when the mere sense of living is happiness enough to many, and Gabrielle felt so glad in the soft sun that she must go and do something or say something kindly to some one or her sense of delight would be insupportable. It is not unlikely that she was thinking, too, of the possibility of meeting Fielding. She thought about him a good deal on the way, for Major Leven had made it his duty to tell her all he knew about Fielding. Good kindly Major Leven was under the impression that he had put Gabrielle enough on her guard when he told her that Fielding had voluntarily withdrawn from respectability and discipline, and had left his home in consequence. The story only raised Fielding unspeakably in Gabrielle's eyes. Mrs. Leven was not entirely wrong in her conjecture. 'I always knew there was something in him. I always knew he was not like commonplace people,' was Gabrielle's internal comment even while Major Leven was striving to impress her with a sense of the impropriety of encouraging the acquaintance of such a social outlaw.

She found Janet alone, and worse than alone—lonely—and much depressed. Everything seemed to be going badly with them, poor Janet said. Robert had not been the same lately at all; he did not trouble her now so much about fancied admirers, but he was always unhappy, and he was very often away. Janet did not tell the story of what had happened the night of the scene with Fielding. She was far too loyal to betray what ought to be kept to herself, even if Gabrielle were not too loyal to invite any such confidences; but Gabrielle learned quite enough to know that things were not going well, and that the poor little beauty was unhappy. One thought occurred to Gabrielle at once. Perhaps Charlton was poorer than he cared to tell his wife. He was proud of spirit; perhaps the humiliation of being in want was more than he could bear. Perhaps his very affection for Janet was one reason why he seemed so changed towards her.

After a while Robert himself came in, looking weary and scared and miserable. He became still more confused on seeing Gabrielle, and cast an inquiring glance at his wife, as if he were wondering what and how much she might have been telling to their visitor.

Gabrielle talked for a while with him about the work she had brought him to do. He tried to seem at his ease, and to be at once courteous and independent. But he was unmistakably

restless and nervous. Janet found some occasion for leaving the room; she had still some faith in the possibility of a word from Mrs. Vanthorpe working wonders. Gabrielle seized the opportunity, and came to the point in her quick kindly way.

'I am afraid Janet is very unhappy, Mr. Charlton.'

'Does she say so?' he asked.

'She doesn't complain, if you mean that; but surely you can see that she is unhappy.'

'I wonder who is happy?' he said, with an effort to be at once tragic and not ridiculous. 'I am not.'

'No,' said Gabrielle eagerly; 'and don't you see that that is the very reason why she is not? I can see well enough that you are unhappy, Mr. Charlton, and of course she must see it. Oh, yes, excuse me if I seem to jump to conclusions about you; I only mean to be friendly. You are not happy, and of course she is not. I think about her very much. Tell me—is it anything in which friendship is of any use? you both have friends.'

'I never had any friends,' he said gloomily.

'Come, now, you must not be unjust. I know you have friends; you have one friend at least.'

She spoke with as frank an earnestness as if she were talking to Major Leven.

'Tell me,' she went on, 'is there anything I can do? I would do a great deal for Janet, if I only knew how. I think there is so much a friend might do if people would not misunderstand each other.'

Charlton got up from his chair. He dreaded to hear her offer to help him and Janet with money. That would show what she thought of him, he said to himself. He was always telling himself what she thought of him—that she only considered him a humble follower and a poor devil, but not the less did he dread the words coming from her own lips to convince him of what he already believed.

'We have never been the same here,' he said, 'since that man Fielding came among us.'

Gabrielle coloured and felt herself growing as nervous as he was. Was this to be some story of jealousy and of Janet? She cordially wished now she had not spoken.

'Why do you speak against Mr. Fielding?' she asked with a coldness that he might have thought ominous if he had had his senses more about him.

'I don't know; there is something unlucky about him. We have never been the same since he came here. I don't believe his name is Fielding. I know he goes by other names; such

fellows always do. I hope you don't let him push his acquaintance on you, Mrs. Vantherpe; he is not a person for a lady like you to know. I believe he is one of a gang of swindlers that I have read about in the papers, and I'll expose him——'

Gabrielle had been listening in perfect amazement. At this point she rose from her chair.

'I am sorry to hear you speak in this way,' she said. 'I thought you called yourself a friend of Mr. Fielding?'

'No, Mrs. Vanthorpe, I don't call him a friend——'

'I do call him a friend,' Gabrielle said emphatically, 'and I know he is a gentleman, and I am sure he is a man of honour; and your talk, Mr. Charlton, is unworthy of you, and disgraceful—yes, I call it disgraceful, and nothing else.'

Charlton looked up bewildered. At this moment Janet came into the room again, and Gabrielle went towards her to say a kindly word or two, lest she should think herself included in the anger bestowed upon her husband. There had been a knock at the door which for the moment no one had heeded, and presently Fielding entered the room. He only saw Robert at first.

'Look here, Charlton,' he said, 'I fancy I was a little rude to you the other night, and I've come to say I am sorry for it. You were a little off your head at the moment about something or other, and I ought to have made allowance for that, and I don't believe I did, and I should like to apologise.'

At this moment he saw Gabrielle. A silence fell upon the group. Janet was dimly aware that her husband had in some way incurred Mrs. Vanthorpe's anger. Charlton did not venture to put on an appearance of friendship to Fielding under Gabrielle's eyes. Gabrielle was divided between anger and curiosity. Fielding was the first to speak.

'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Vanthorpe; I did not see you before. I came here to offer an apology to this surly old Charlton—this old young Charlton. You must have heard me talking of an apology, and I ought to say that I came to offer an apology, not to ask for one.'

'Do you really owe Mr. Charlton an apology?' Gabrielle asked, looking not at Fielding but at Charlton.

'That I do,' Fielding answered cheerily. 'We both lost our tempers a little, I fancy; but there was nothing to disturb me, and so I had no excuse. I dare say Mrs. Charlton thought us a pretty pair of fools.'

'Mr. Fielding feels bound as a gentleman to offer an apology, when he thinks he has done wrong,' Gabrielle said with a certain emphasis. 'Do you owe Mr. Fielding any apology, Mr. Charlton?'

'Not he,' Fielding said, striking in good-humouredly; 'he was a little surprised and confused at the time. You see, Mrs. Vanthorpe, when one of two people is not surprised or excited, I hold him to be responsible for all that happens. It's like the steamer and the sailing ship, you know; the steamer is master of itself, and can go fast or slow as it will, and turn any way it likes, and so it must keep out of the sailing vessel's course.'

Fielding and Charlton had shaken hands. Charlton kept his eyes down, and only muttered a word or two. Fielding ascribed his awkwardness to the consciousness that he had also been in the wrong and made a fool of himself. He pushed the whole controversy out of the way, therefore, as fast as he could.

'I wish to speak to you, Mr. Fielding,' Gabrielle said with marked distinctness, 'about something very particular.'

'May I have the honour of calling on you—at any hour that suits you?'

'I am going to walk home,' she said. 'I am very fond of walking; will you walk a little way with me?'

'With the greatest pleasure,' Fielding said with as much gravity and as entire an absence of any indication of surprise as if such an invitation were one of the everyday occurrences of everybody's life. Gabrielle spoke with the express purpose of showing Charlton how friendly she could be with the man he had been slandering. She would have done as much for Charlton an hour before if anyone had spoken unfairly of him. Janet opened the eyes of wonder as she saw Mrs. Vanthorpe and Fielding go down the stairs together. Charlton sat down with a dogged air, took up some work, and went viciously at it. He did not speak a word until his wife said:

'Is Mrs. Vanthorpe offended with you, Robert? Did you say anything?'

'I said what I believe to be the truth,' he answered sharply. 'I warned her against that fellow. I told her he was no fit acquaintance for her; and he isn't. I told her he was a scamp of some kind; and I know he is.'

'Oh, Robert, how could you? I am sure she wouldn't like that.'

'What woman ever liked the truth?' he asked scornfully, and he applied himself to his work. Janet said no more, but looked listlessly out of the window. She wondered whether they could possibly go to Mrs. Vanthorpe's any more now.

Gabrielle and Fielding had got into the drear and silent little square out of which Bolingbroke Place opened.

'I shall not trouble you to walk far with me, Mr. Fielding,' Gabrielle said. 'Suppose we go round this square?'

'Anywhere you wish.'

He felt it a strange experience to be thus walking alone with her. It was very delightful in its way, but odd, and, under present circumstances, not a little embarrassing. She did not seem in the least embarrassed.

They walked on the little flagged footpath that goes round the railings of the square, and they were under the branches of trees which even in that sombre enclosure the spring was beginning to quicken into life and to inspire with the memories of the greenwood itself and with dreams of the youth of the world.

'Well, Mr. Fielding?'

'I beg pardon.'

'You know what I want to ask you about. When I saw you at my house you told me nothing. Perhaps it was my fault; I ought to have asked you more distinctly.'

'Oh—about poor Vanthorpe?'

'Poor Vanthorpe? There is something bad, then—something melancholy? I might have guessed it. You seemed so unwilling to speak.'

'The messenger comes in for the blame of the evil tidings,' he said. 'The news is bad, Mrs. Vanthorpe.'

'He is dead?'

'He is dead.'

Then there was a moment's silence. They walked slowly under the trees. One of Gabrielle's great hopes was gone.

'Is that the worst?' she asked after this pause. 'Is there anything worse to be told than his death? What was his life?'

'His life was not bad—not what men call bad. He was a man of honour.'

'Thank God for that,' she said.

'He was a friend to his friend.'

'Thank God again. These are virtues—what can one want more?'

'I am glad to hear you say so; most women do not think so, Mrs. Vanthorpe—'

'Do not think what? Do not think that honour, and sincerity, and faithfulness to one's friend are virtues? Mr. Fielding, what women can you have known!'

'I meant, that women look for respectability, and church-going, and piety, and all sorts of things,' he said. 'I thought mere truth, and honour, and faithfulness to one's friends, were

good qualities that only men value; or that men value more than women, at all events.'

'Don't think so any more. Well, tell me all the rest.'

'I will tell you,' he said slowly, 'if you will promise me one thing.'

'I don't like promises; but tell me what it is.'

'That you will not try to take any step whatever in this matter until you hear again from me.'

'In what matter?'

'In—well, in anything that relates to poor Phil Vanthorpe. I must ask you that; I have good reasons for it; you must trust me so far.'

'Of course I will trust you, and I will promise if you wish.' She looked up at him, and their eyes met. Full confidence was exchanged. The look was enough; each understood the other so far.

Then Fielding told her all he knew of Vanthorpe, only keeping back for the present the whereabouts of the wife and child. Gabrielle's heart swelled with joy when she heard of the wife and child. Tears were in her eyes; as she looked at the pavement, it seemed to flicker before her.

'Oh, I will go to her,' she exclaimed.

A thrill of dismay passed through Fielding at the words. He was glad that he had bound her safely by a promise.

'Remember, you are not to move until I tell you,' he said.

'But the child, Mr. Fielding?'

'We'll take care of that. All will come right; but you must wait—remember your promise.'

'I do remember it—I do; but this is so tantalising. I am so glad, and so sorry, and so perplexed. What strange chance throw me in your way?'

'Strange indeed!' he said.

'If I had not chanced to meet you over there'—she glanced towards Bolingbroke Place—'I might never have known of his wife and child.'

'You might never have known.' He was thinking of something else; he was thinking, not altogether joyously, of other things that might not have happened if they two had not met at Bolingbroke Place.

He gave her to understand as gently as he could that Philip Vanthorpe's wife was not exactly a woman whom she could delight to know. His words made no impression; Gabrielle was evidently only longing for the chance to clasp her to her bosom.

'I suppose he married a poor girl,' she said. 'I am glad of it; I like him the better—I shall like her the better.'

'No, it isn't exactly that. She is not what would be called a lady.'

'I don't care about that, Mr. Fielding. Education and manners are not everything. I thank heaven I have never learned to think them so.'

He thought it as well to say no more for the present. It seemed like sacrilege to intrude upon such unworldly faith with any worldly cautions. They spoke a little more of the one subject, and then she said, stopping in the square:

'Now, Mr. Fielding, I shall dismiss you. You have done me a great favour. You have made me very sad, and very hopeful and happy, I think; and besides I look for favours to come from you in this matter. Now I want to say one word about yourself. I know who you are, and all about you. Why don't you go and see your brother, and be friends with him?'

He was a little staggered by her unexpected knowledge, but he did not question its genuineness, nor ask her where she had got it; he only said,

'Well, Mrs. Vanthorpe, my brother and I have not met for years, you know; and I suppose he hardly remembers me, and I am sure he does not care about me.'

'Oh, but you don't know. It is so wrong to judge of people in that way. And one's brother! if I had a brother, do you think I would allow any wretched misunderstanding to come between me and him?'

'What would you do?' he asked, looking with interest into her eyes. They were now walking slowly on again.

'What would I do? Why, I would go to him and call him brother, and bare my heart to him. Are there only you two left of your family, and you go on in that way, as if the world would last for ever, and there were hundreds of years for the clearing up of absurd misunderstandings! Mr. Fielding, it is a shame.'

He was not anxious to break off the conversation. Her interest in it delighted him.

'You see, Mrs. Vanthorpe, he is the rich man; he has the lands and beeves, and all the rest of it. I am the outlaw; he is the good boy, I am the idle apprentice. If I were to go now and hang around Dives' gates——'

'Yes, yes, I understand,' she said impatiently; 'that is what you call pride—man's pride, I suppose; the pride that would rather do a great wrong than be suspected of a small

meanness. What does it matter who suspects you? No one will for whose bad or good opinion you ought to care.'

'But why I, Mrs. Vanthorpe—why not he?'

'Does he know that you are here? Have you written to let him know. Was he likely to be found calling on someone at Bolingbroke Place as I happened to be?'

'Not with the same motive, certainly.'

'How? I don't understand.'

'Not for the sake of doing good to some poor devils, as you were.'

'Oh, you don't know. He probably does all the good he can in his own way. Well, Mr. Fielding, I give you fair warning. I am what you call a friend to my friend; I am that or nothing, and if I can do anything to bring you and your brother together I'll do it. That I am determined on, whether you like it or not. And so good-bye for the present, and thank you again.'

He did not offer to go any farther with her. He looked after her for a moment as she went her way; and when she passed out of the square it seemed to become grey and arid and commonplace. He walked listlessly along, and as he walked he kept thinking to himself that it is such women who make men feel sorry they had not led better lives; and all the common errors of youth, and folly, and adventure, and animal spirits seemed things to put away from memory as much as possible when thinking of her. 'I think if it were all to do over again I shouldn't mind being called Clarkson,' he said to himself.

CHAPTER XV.

A MAN AND A BROTHER.

GABRIELLE'S active spirit was again at work. It had now a thoroughly congenial task. If she could reconcile these two brothers, what achievement could be more worthy of a woman who had devoted herself to the good of her fellows?

She thought she could do it. She felt sure she could. It was essentially a woman's work. Woman the peacemaker was one of Gabrielle's cherished ideas. History, perhaps, and the common experience of life do not invariably exhibit woman in that capacity; but Gabrielle not merely loved, as we all do, to think of woman thus employed--she firmly believed, as some people perhaps do not, that such was woman's most congenial employment. She felt that a movement towards reconciliation

would come with best effect from the elder brother who had the title, and the lands, and beeves, and all the rest of it, as Fielding said; and the thing was now how to get at Sir Wilberforce Fielding. Doubtless this could be done through Major Leven. He ought to have means of knowing everyone who was called after a philanthropist. But then Gabrielle shrank from making Major Leven a confederate in her plot, and she did not like the idea of inviting the unfriendly comments of his wife in case of failure, which even Gabrielle admitted to herself was not absolutely impossible. So she bethought her of good Lady Honeybell, and she found to her great joy that Lady Honeybell was well acquainted with Sir Wilberforce, and that she would ask him to come and see her on one of her Thursday afternoons, when Gabrielle could happen to be there also, and an acquaintance might be brought about. Gabrielle told Lady Honeybell frankly what she wanted to do, and gave her a slight sketch of the family history and the strange adventures and yet stranger character of the younger Fielding.

Lady Honeybell was interested and amused.

‘Eh, my dear, it seems to me that you are a great deal too young and too pretty to be meddling and making between these gentlemen. I think you had better leave it to me, and see what I can do.’

‘But, Lady Honeybell, what does it matter whether one is young or not, if one can do any good? One can’t be too young to try to do good. I might not have any right perhaps to ask a stranger, even you who are so kind, to say anything about Mr. Fielding. He did not object when I told him I would speak to his brother if I saw him ever; but then—’

‘But then he might not like anyone else to do it?’ the kindly Lady Honeybell conjectured. ‘Well, it is likely enough he would rather have you for his second than me, though I think I could manage things better for all that. Nay, nay, don’t look disappointed; I’m not going to interfere with your mission, if you think you have a call that way. It’s a good purpose, and I don’t see how any harm can come of it anyhow—to you, or to Sir Wilberforce either, for the matter of that. You’ll not find him a very romantic person, I may as well tell you beforehand.’

So it was settled that Gabrielle was to try her hand on Sir Wilberforce at the first opportunity, and the opportunity was easily made. One of Lady Honeybell’s Thursdays was appointed; the hour came, and the man.

Gabrielle was a little disappointed at first by the appearance

of Sir Wilberforce. He was tall and large, florid of face, reddish of hair, with light blue eyes, and a general expression of shallow cheeriness. He was not like his brother, except perhaps in height and strength of build; seen in the back, he was a little like a Clarkson Fielding grown stout, and perhaps he had a family resemblance in rather well-formed features. If Gabrielle could have seen Wilberforce's mother and compared her with Clarkson's mother she might have understood how and where the two brothers came to be unlike each other. After being disappointed Gabrielle became suddenly encouraged, for Sir Wilberforce was so much older than she that she felt she might say anything to him. He must have been forty at the very least, and there was even, it seemed to her, something fatherly about him; altogether she felt quite equal to her task now. Sir Wilberforce was formally presented to her, and Lady Honeybell was making efforts to withdraw her other guests gradually from the immediate neighbourhood, and leave Gabrielle to a *tête-à-tête* with Sir Wilberforce. This was not at first quite easy.

'Have you heard, Lady Honeybell, of what I have been doing with my house? No? I have been trying an entirely new plan of lighting and heating; the whole place is turned upside down. I am convinced that our present system of lighting and heating our houses is opposed to the first principles of economy and of health, and I think I have hit upon the right way at last.'

'Furnaces — steam-pipes?' Lady Honeybell suggested. 'Anything like the American plans?'

'No, oh dear no, nothing of the kind. Furnaces, and steam, and all that, are quite absurd. You see, you only increase the very evils you want to avoid. American houses are stifling — stifling; regular hothouses, indeed,' and Sir Wilberforce laughed quietly at his own joke. 'The principle is to get the maximum of light and of dryness with the minimum of heat. Of course you can't have light without heat, some heat; but my theory is the minimum of heat always. I hold that heat of itself generates heat. I begin at the very beginning, you know. I must explain my process, Lady Honeybell, if it succeeds — and I am sure it will.'

'But I am so old-fashioned in my ways, Sir Wilberforce, and I never could bear having any house of mine turned upside down.'

'No, really, is that so? Now, I delight in it. I am always trying something new. After all, you know, practical science

is the great thing. It's the spirit of the age. Science belongs to all time, but practical science, you know, belongs to our time. I am always occupied in practical science.'

'Now, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' Lady Honeybell suggested, 'is a young woman, and she is in love with every new discovery, I am sure, and I don't suppose she has a great many calls upon her time just now, and I dare say a little absorption in something would do her all the world of good. Why don't you go in for trying some of these new processes in your house, Mrs. Vanthorpe? I'm sure Sir Wilberforce is the kindest—oh, he would be delighted to explain them all to you any time.'

'Delighted, delighted,' Sir Wilberforce said, looking more closely at Gabrielle, whose name he had not quite caught at first, and whom he supposed to be a Miss something or other. Sir Wilberforce was not much drawn towards Misses; he did not find that as a rule they cared for the application of science to the business of practical life.

'I like to hear of anything that is new,' said Gabrielle, doing for the moment a little bit of hypocrisy. The hero of older days had to stoop down in order to be made a knight. Perhaps this was allegorical, as a sort of excuse for the destiny which compels even the most chivalric impulse to stoop now and then in order to get leave to accomplish its lofty mission.

'Should you really?' Sir Wilberforce asked. 'I am delighted to hear it. I like of all things to find a lady taking an interest in the practical application of science. I have turned myself altogether to such pursuits. I don't trouble much now about politics—don't see the use of it. Poor father was a great philanthropist; I don't trouble about philanthropy in his sort of way, you know. I think a man may do more good now by helping to develop practical science. The time is gone by for emancipation, and abolition, and all that sort of thing, Mrs. Vanthorpe—don't you think so? And missions to teach religion to the heathen, and gospel in foreign parts, and all that—well, I subscribe to them all, you know, because poor father did; but I give you my word, Mrs. Vanthorpe, I sometimes wish the heathen would come over here, and do a little missionary work among us. Yes, yes! don't you think so?'

'Now is my time,' thought Gabrielle.

'You do good in one way, Sir Wilberforce—your father did good in another; everyone must have his path in life. I know a member of your family—' and colouring slightly she made a plunge at her subject. She was at once stimulated and alarmed by the kindly encouragement of Lady Honeybell, who, being

somewhat short of sight, was sending eager inquiring looks towards her, and was assisting them by slight pantomimic gestures at once urging her on and questioning as to the progress she was making.

'I beg your pardon?' Sir Wilberforce said. 'You were speaking of some member of my family, Mrs. Vanthorpe?'

'I know a member of your family—your brother.'

'My brother? Yes, yes! I have a brother, but I have not seen him these many years, poor fellow; shouldn't know him from Adam if he were to walk into this room, I dare say. But you were saying you know him. You must have been very young when you knew him, Mrs. Vanthorpe, for he has been ever so long away. I wonder where he is now?'

'He is in London,' Gabrielle said quietly. 'I saw him only a few days ago.'

'God bless my soul! you don't mean that? Quite sure you are not mistaken, Mrs. Vanthorpe? He's been away so long, you know, and we never heard anything about him. I almost fancied he was dead really.'

'He is not dead; he has come back to London, Sir Wilberforce, and I am sure he is very anxious to see you.'

'Do you tell me so? Really, now? Poor Clarkson! why, we haven't met for years. I shall be so delighted. If you should happen to see him again, Mrs. Vanthorpe, would you ask him to give me a call? I wonder where he has been all this time?'

'I think he would take it more kindly if you were to call on him, Sir Wilberforce. He is a little proud, perhaps; and I believe he is under the impression that there was a sort of quarrel or estrangement of some kind.'

'Do you think so? Does he think so? Quarrel—estrangement—oh, dear no, except that of course there must be some estrangement when a young fellow takes himself off to the other end of the world and does not come back for years and years. Poor father, he was as good a man as ever lived, Mrs. Vanthorpe, but I always thought he was wrong about Clarkson, you know. I always told him so, and I can assure you he didn't like to be told it one bit. Clarkson was a good fellow, you know, and a very clever fellow, but a little wrongheaded—a little wrongheaded. Poor father and he didn't hit it off somehow. Clarkson's mother was odd, a little odd; very clever, quite clever, but a little odd. We made up an odd household at that time. I fancy Clarkson was tired of the whole thing; after his mother died, you know. And he has really come back, you tell me?

Not very well off, I suppose? or did he make money in—wherever he was? They often do, you know.'

On this point Gabrielle could offer no opinion.

'No, of course not; he wouldn't talk to you about such things as that. Why, I have any amount of money standing to his account—his allowance that he wouldn't take, and poor father wished it to be always kept for him. He wasn't unkind, poor father, only a little odd, you know.'

'I suppose he was very sorry when his son went away,' Gabrielle said; 'did he blame himself?'

'Blame himself, Mrs. Vanthorpe? Oh, no, not he—that wasn't his way. He always thought he was right in everything—never supposed he could be in fault. He wouldn't have done a wrong thing for the world if he had only known he was doing wrong, but that was the thing you never could convince him of; he never would see it; he was always sure he was right. And so Clarkson has turned up again? I wonder if he has picked up some new things—new ideas—abroad. I don't think he used to care much about practical science, but travel and experience change a man. I hope he isn't married, Mrs. Vanthorpe? I wonder if he remembered to tell you anything about that.'

'No, I am sure he is not married,' Gabrielle said, with as little approach to a smile as Sir Wilberforce had himself when he gravely put the question.

'I'm very glad to hear it. A man should not marry so young as that. I don't think Clarkson can be thirty yet—no, I am sure he isn't quite thirty. I have a theory, Mrs. Vanthorpe, that a man ought not to marry until he is forty. Don't you agree with me? or have you thought the matter over at all? Have you given any attention to it?'

Gabrielle not giving an answer at once to this question, Sir Wilberforce became possessed with the conviction either that she was married to a very young man or that she was a widow, in either of which cases the discussion he had started would be unsatisfactory. He therefore turned the conversation at once upon his brother again.

'So much obliged to you, Mrs. Vanthorpe, for telling me about poor Clarkson. I'll call on him at once. By the way, do you know where he is living?'

Gabrielle described the locality of Bolingbroke Place to the surprised baronet.

'What an odd sort of place! I wonder how he found his way over there? Dare say he must be hard up, poor Clarkson!'

Do you know the number, Mrs. Vanthorpe? Pray don't mind, though—don't trouble yourself. I never should remember it. I'll call at your house, if you will allow me that honour, and if you will be kind enough to have his address found for me I'll write it down then and there, and I'll go to see him at once.'

The delighted Gabrielle made an appointment on the instant to receive a call from Sir Wilberforce the next day but one. She could hardly believe in her success. Everything seemed to be shaping itself specially to the ends of her little plot. For the moment Sir Wilberforce talked of visiting her she formed a new and a charming plot.

'A very delightful young woman your friend Mrs. Vanthorpe,' Sir Wilberforce whispered to Lady Honeybell as he was taking his leave. 'Sensible woman, too; has some interest in practical science.'

'She's a dear good creature,' Lady Honeybell answered, evading the question as to practical science.

'Husband dead?'

Lady Honeybell nodded, and Sir Wilberforce took his leave, not without casting a glance back at the corner of the room where Gabrielle was now sitting.

Presently Gabrielle too was departing.

'How goes the benevolent plot, my dear?' Lady Honeybell asked in a low tone.

'Oh, Lady Honeybell,' Gabrielle replied, her eyes all lighting up with joy. 'I do think I have done something good to-day—I do indeed.'

'Indeed, I shouldn't wonder,' said Lady Honeybell.

If there was a restless sleepless pillow in London that night it was that which Gabrielle Vanthorpe pressed. She was absorbed in her schemes and hopes, and would have cordially besought the gods to annihilate time and space to bring two brothers together. One of her hopes had sunk below her horizon. It had risen and gone down again with as sudden a burst as that of the sun seems to be when we watch him rising or setting on the sea. She was never to see the lost brother of her husband, now at length known to be lost indeed. She would never have the chance of restoring that son to his mother. But it was yet open to her perhaps to do some good even in that direction. There was a wife, and there was a child, and she would not be prevented by any considerations of prudence or propriety from striving to hold out a helping hand to the woman who had so near a claim on her. In the mean time she had the opportunity, rarely given to anyone in common life, of bringing

two brothers together who had long been estranged, and that was enough to fill her thoughts and make a night restless. She had been disappointed in Sir Wilberforce Fielding, as Lady Honeybell predicted, but not by any means as Lady Honeybell expected. She was agreeably disappointed. He was odd, Gabrielle thought, and a little absurd, and something perhaps of a bore, but she was convinced that he had a good and kindly heart, and that he only needed to see his brother in order to be drawn towards him—as she herself had been, Gabrielle thought simply. She liked the younger brother, and she was sure she would like the elder too.

The day and the hour had come. Gabrielle had arranged all her plans admirably. Sir Wilberforce was coming to see her at five o'clock, and she had written a short note to Clarkson asking him to call on her as soon after five as possible without telling him why or wherefore. She had given instructions that Mr. Fielding was to be shown in when he came, but that his name was not to be announced. She counted a good deal on the dramatic effect of surprise. Sir Wilberforce, she feared, might, if formally prepared for what he had to expect, take things too coolly; his brother, on the other hand, if allowed to expect anything, would expect too much, and would go away disappointed.

Sir Wilberforce came punctually to the moment. He had been puzzling himself as to how Gabrielle had come to know Clarkson, or even to know of his being in London. He had not thought anything about this when first she spoke to him, but now it puzzled him a good deal. In his experience of life he had not known of women who went out of their way to take any trouble about young men of their own class unless where some very close friendship existed or the possibility of a yet closer tie. Englishwomen didn't do such things, he thought; they don't like the idea of having remarks made. Yet here was an Englishwoman who evidently did not care about the remarks that might be made. This in itself was disturbing to one's established notions of things. Sir Wilberforce was not a very clever person, nor was his a particularly lofty order of being; but he was without affectation, and was prepared so far to understand a woman like Gabrielle Vanthorpe.

'Good day, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' he said, as he entered Gabrielle's room, smiling, fresh, and florid, looking not at all unlike a more reasonable Frenchman's notion of a typical English Milor. 'So good of you to allow me to visit you. I hope you haven't taken the trouble to write down this boy's address for me? No, no; it would be too bad to give you that trouble. I was going to

ask you, too, if you don't mind telling me, how you came to know of poor Clarkson's existence, and where he is, and all that.'

Gabrielle felt that the moment had come. While Sir Wilberforce was speaking, she saw the younger Fielding enter the room. Fielding knew his brother at once. Sir Wilberforce hardly noticed the new-comer, but stood quietly waiting for Gabrielle to answer.

'Come,' said Gabrielle, not without a certain trepidation and a tendency to break down, 'I have brought you two brothers together and—and—' she did not exactly know what to say next.

'Why, this is never Clarkson?' Sir Wilberforce said, holding out his hand. Yes, but it is, though. How do you do, Clarkson?'

'Well, Wilberforce,' said Clarkson; and he did not say any more. They shook hands.

'Should never have known you again,' Wilberforce observed. 'I say, what a tall good-looking fellow you have grown. I was just going to see you; came to get your address from Mrs. Vanthorpe; ask her if I didn't.'

'You'll find me in a queer old shop,' Fielding said; 'ask Mrs. Vanthorpe if it isn't.'

'Never mind about that,' Wilberforce interrupted; 'I've a lot of money for you, you know; all your own.'

'I'm all right; I don't want money.'

'Poor father's dead, you know.'

'I know,' said Fielding.

Thus the two brothers met for the first time after a lapse of long years and after changes that cannot be measured by years. It might have seemed the coldest and most unsatisfactory meeting possible under such circumstances. But to Gabrielle, whose imaginative temperament did not always lead her astray, it did not thus appear. She was sure that the younger Fielding was satisfied with the manner in which his brother had received him, and that cordiality would soon set in. She was satisfied with them and with herself. As she stood a little apart from the brothers she felt tears of delight rising in her eyes.

'You'll come and stay with me,' Wilberforce said, 'and we'll talk over things?'

'Well, I don't know about staying with you; we'll talk about that.'

'Oh, yes, of course you will stay with your brother,' Gabrielle said, breaking into the conversation. 'You must do whatever your elder brother wishes you to do.'

'Of course he must, mustn't he, Mrs. Vanthorpe?' Sir Wilberforce asked, turning to her, and delighted that she had entered into the talk. Both the brothers, it must be owned, grew more cordial in their manner when relieved from the exactions of the *tête-à-tête*. Gabrielle saw this well enough. The rest will come in time, she thought. The brothers went away together. Sir Wilberforce had been wondering whether Clarkson would stay after him, and would act like one whose character as an intimate friend gave him a right to do so. But he saw that Clarkson seemed to claim no such right, and when the elder rose to go the younger rose too.

Sir Wilberforce was rapid and profuse in his expressions of thankfulness to Gabrielle. His brother said nothing. When they were going, Fielding the younger was a moment behind Sir Wilberforce, and Gabrielle caught at the chance.

'Have I done well?' she asked.

'As you always do,' he answered. 'You couldn't do anything that was not well.'

'You are satisfied with your brother?'

'I am sure he is a good fellow; I know he is; I like his expression; I trust to it.'

'Oh, so do I,' said Gabrielle fervently.

Fielding followed his brother. As they were going down the stairs Gabrielle could hear Wilberforce saying in his odd quick way,

'You must have lots of things to tell me. I say, you ought to have picked up all sorts of new ideas abroad about practical science, and all that. I'm so glad to hear that you are not married. Too soon for you to think of that—much too soon. I am hardly thinking of getting married yet; daresay I must some day.'

Gabrielle's plot had succeeded beyond her best expectations—so far.

CHAPTER XVI.

'I WILL DISCOURSE WITH MY PHILOSOPHER.'

It was Sunday; the bells were clinking and chiming for the churchgoers all over London, and were making their jangle heard even in Gabrielle's sheltered little demeane. With the smell of the leaves and the rustle of the branches all around her, Gabrielle found the echoes of the bells blend and lose themselves in sweet vague memories of delicious summer Sundays long ago—her 'long ago'—in the country, when the air was so

soft and quiet that the crow of some distant cock seemed as if it might have roused all the world from sleep. Few sensations can be more sweet and tantalising than that sudden illusion of the country in the midst of London; it is like the breath of the west wind that on a soft, mild winter day deludes and delights one for a moment with the thought that spring has come.

Gabrielle felt in a mood to be very happy. She began to think of late that she had not been living in vain. She had, however, for some time been haunted by the thought of Claudia Lemuel, whom she had promised to visit some Sunday; and now this was a Sunday.

Gabrielle was one of that rare class of beings, sometimes found rather trying by their friends, with whom a promise given is a conscientious burden, and almost a physical torment, until it be fairly redeemed.

'I must go to see Miss Lemuel to-day: I cannot neglect her any longer,' Gabrielle said. 'Will you come, Gertrude? Don't, if you don't like—you are not bound; but I promised, and I am really anxious to see her, and to hear what she can have to say about her philosophy and all the rest of it: it may do one good. Besides, her mother has gone, and the poor girl is all alone. One must feel for her.'

'If that old woman were my mother,' the gracious Gertrude said, 'I should feel very much obliged to her for taking herself off anywhere and leaving me to myself.'

'Ah, but then she is her mother——'

'Yes, that's the nuisance of it; if she weren't, one might get rid of her.'

'Then you don't dare to come?' Gabrielle said, a little discouraged; 'well, I feel bound to go, Gertrude.'

'Oh, I should like to go very much,' Miss Elvin said hastily. She could not by any means afford to seem regardless of Gabrielle's wishes just yet. 'But I fancied my brother would call to see me to-day—he would call about five; we could hardly be back so soon, perhaps? but he may not be able to come.'

'Your brother, Gertrude? Wait for your brother, by all means. That is much better for you than going to see Miss Lemuel. You are not pledged to her at all.'

It was settled that Miss Elvin was to remain at home on the chance of her brother calling. Miss Elvin did not really expect her brother, but she was lazy, and hated the thought of going to be bored by Miss Lemuel; and besides she had a faint hope that Mr. Walter Taxal might put in an appearance that

day, and it would be very satisfactory to have him all to herself. She felt very free and hopeful, then, when Gabrielle had fairly gone out of the place.

Miss Elvin was on one of her not infrequent visits to Gabrielle. She was one of the sources of Gabrielle's recent happiness, for Gabrielle was able to believe that she had helped to open a career for the child of song.

The introduction to Lady Honeybell had been to Miss Elvin like the piece of lead which the philosophical experimentalist hands to the poor man in the 'Arabian Nights,' and out of which come all the chances that bring high fortune. She sang at Lady Honeybell's parties, she sang at other parties, she was invited to sing everywhere; she was becoming the songstress of the season in private life; she was well paid and liberally complimented. An eminent and fashionable artist pronounced her beautiful after the true form of beauty, and several young men who had thought her an ugly little girl before, raved about her peerless charms from that moment. She only sang in private, and said that was all she intended to do; although in her secret heart she still cherished high above almost every other ambition the longing to come out on the stage of the grand opera and make a splendid success there, and see the whole town at her feet. This was almost her highest ambition, but there was one still higher, and that was to be married to a man with position and money. She was a very shrewd little person, and seeing that success in opera did not by any means depend so much upon the patronage of a select few as upon the critics and the 'great big stupid public,' she was well content to try her chance for a season or two in private. If during that time she could induce a man of position to fall in love with her, he would be very much more likely to marry her, she thought, than if she had actually made her appearance on the stage. Meantime, she had made her brother give up the Camberwell residence and take a bedroom in one of the small West-end streets, where there could be a room also for her at any time when she needed such shelter. But for the present she had little need of it. She lived at Lady Honeybell's or at Gabrielle's, or at the house of any other lady who chose to ask her to spend a few days. She had in fact thrown herself upon the world to be protected, cared for, and sheltered; and the world, as is its lazy wont, had accepted the trust unquestioning, and protected, cared for, and sheltered her. It is marvellous how much of this duty a certain class of being can calmly impose upon other people. The person who undertakes such a part must have a genius for it; training

will not do, nor will any amount of patient resolve enable him or her to acquire the art to whom it has not been the spontaneous gift of bountiful nature. A shy man might as well try to teach himself to be at once pushing and easy as one who has not Miss Elvin's faculty go about to acquire the knack of it.

Miss Elvin had set her heart especially on Walter Taxal. There was much about him which would have suited her exactly. He was the son of a lord; he was called 'the Honourable;' his wife would be 'the Honourable Mrs. Taxal.' He was not dependent on a younger brother's allowance—she had found out that he had money from his mother; he was fond of music, and naturally he would have musical parties at his house, when he was married, and he would be proud of his wife's singing; assuming of course that that happy being could sing. Between her and the possible realisation of this ambition, Miss Elvin saw one barrier, and that was the person of the all-unsuspecting Gabrielle Vanthorpe. Miss Elvin had made up her mind that Gabrielle was anxious to become the Honourable Mrs. Taxal; the way she went on to that unfortunate young man, Miss Elvin said to herself, was quite shocking. He must surely see it, she thought; but then young men were so weak sometimes, and this one young man was so goodnatured that she greatly feared the audacious arts of Gabrielle Vanthorpe might fail to meet with their just discomfiture.

Professor Elvin was in a certain sense a confidant of his sister's plans and hopes. At least, if she did not tell him of her own designs on Mr. Taxal and ask directly for his sympathy, she told him of Gabrielle's designs on that youth and appealed for his reprobation; and Professor Elvin understood, and gave his best hopes and wishes accordingly. It should be mentioned, perhaps, that he now began to think of dropping the title of Professor. Not long since, it was his ambition to be thus always addressed: but ambition's goal of yesterday is the starting-point it longs to leave behind to-day, and Elvin now would rather have the professorship forgotten altogether. He had sometimes, when meeting military men, spoken of himself as a brother in arms. This was a modest playfulness on his part. He talked of himself to guardsmen as a brother in arms with gentle deprecating vanity, inasmuch as he taught one branch of the general profession of arms which they followed, but now he was a little inclined to allow the brotherhood of arms to become a closer kinship. He began to be under the impression that he had at some time held Her Majesty's commission. This is a favourite illusion of a certain class of actors, and it now became

a cherished article of faith with Mr. Elvin. He looked forward to becoming Captain Elvin in course of time. If unhappily he had not made the acquaintance of Gabrielle in the days when the professorship was a self-conferred honour, and insisted on its recognition, he would have been Captain Elvin to her all at once.

Meanwhile Gabrielle has found Claudia Lemuel at home.

Claudia lived, as she had told Gabrielle, in chambers. She did not live in lodgings, but in chambers. The chambers were in one of the newer streets in the neighbourhood of Buckingham Palace. They were on one of the higher ranges of a building occupied as to the ground-floor by the legation of a small foreign state; and as to the upper stages by an artist or two, a mysterious wine company or two, and a foreign dressmaker who professed a new principle—and of course by Claudia Lemuel. Claudia's chambers consisted of a sitting-room, a kitchen, and three bedrooms. Two of the bedrooms were for the young persons whom Claudia called her friends and whom other mortals would have called maid-servants. It was part of Claudia's principles that the two girls must be on an absolute equality with her as regards meals and sleeping accommodation. One of the two women was a faithful friend and follower of Mrs. Lemuel, and had got to understand Claudia's ways; the other was the sixth or seventh newcomer on whom the principles of equality and Claudia's own special pessimism had been tried in succession without any good effect in the way of the exaltation of character. One young person had taken first to wearing and afterwards to pawning Claudia's petticoats and stockings, and when remonstrated with argued rather saucily that Claudia told her one was as good as another in that place, and she didn't mind for her part Claudia's borrowing her petticoats and stockings if she liked. Claudia thought there was something in the argument, but had to dismiss her all the same. Another girl got into the way of going out at night and not coming back until the following morning. Two or three gave instant warning on being told that Claudia's principles forbade any beer. One came home one afternoon rather excited, and replied to Claudia's appeal about the lowering of the dignity of womanhood by brandishing a carving-knife, and the police had to be invited to intervene.

Gabrielle was lucky enough to reach the chambers for the first time while there was a new girl fresh from the country on trial, who had not yet been found wanting. No other visitor had yet arrived, and Gabrielle had time to exchange a few words with Claudia, to ask about Claudia's mother and hear

that she had started on her tour, and then to speak of other things.

'What pretty furniture you have!' Gabrielle said. 'All of the same white wood. What is that pretty white wood?'

'Common white deal,' Claudia answered, delighted to have an opportunity of explaining. 'The cheapest deal. I have had everything made for myself, everything in the room. It is a principle of mine.'

'To have everything made for yourself?'

'Oh, no, but to have everything made on the principle of truth. No paint, no varnish, no table-covers, no chair-covers, no imitation of anything. What is beauty? Utility. What is utility? That which, while best serving its purpose, is the cheapest and easiest to procure. You will ask me why not solid oak or ebony? Because they do not combine the maximum of utility with the minimum of cost.'

'Yes,' said Gabrielle.

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of some visitors. This was the day when Claudia regularly conversed with the friends who were anxious like her, and by her ministrations, to find out the truth in everything and to strip all doctrine bare of excrecence and of illusion. Claudia presented each of her visitors in turn to Gabrielle. She called everyone by her baptismal name except Gabrielle, who was not supposed to be yet converted to the recognition of the fact that any addition to the name is an untruth. To do Claudia's little sisterhood justice, it was unlike most sects in the fact that it cheerfully admitted difference of opinion and variety of practice. Gabrielle had never before seen or heard of any sect whose action illustrated no principle of exclusiveness. 'Is there'—the whimsical question came up in her mind—'only one truly free and liberal sect on earth? and is it represented by a handful of girls and women in a little room at the top of a house in a small London street?' Gabrielle began to grow melancholy.

'My friend Letitia Roberts,' the eager Claudia went on with her introductions. 'Letitia is the celebrated poetess. She is the authoress of "*Alcyone, or the Central Sun*." It is a metaphysical poem. You have read it, perhaps?'

'I have not read it,' Gabrielle answered—'yet.'

'I will send you a copy of it, if you will allow me,' the poetess said. She was a tall and elderly woman to whom Gabrielle's heart went out in a moment, her black dress looked so rusty. In another country, Gabrielle thought, such a woman would have distinction. She did not stop to put any question

to herself as to the geographical situation of the better land which would have crowned the authoress of 'Alcyone.'

'Elizabeth Eagle,' Claudia said, introducing a rather pretty girl, whose youthful face contrasted oddly with the little old-fashioned corkscrew ringlets that adorned it. 'Elizabeth has published a remarkable series of letters on the new political economy. You are familiar with the name of Barbara Severance? She is the editor of the "Religious Dissector," a monthly organ of advanced public opinion, intended to show the central fallacy underlying all creeds hitherto accepted among men. Elizabeth's letters on the new political economy appeared first in the "Dissector." They were then called "A Political Gospel for True Men."' "

'When we speak of men, of course we mean women also,' the editor of the 'Religious Dissector' explained. She was a bright-eyed, fat little woman of about five and-forty, with a beaming expression of kindness; just the sort of woman from whom children instinctively expect bread and jam, with plenty of jam.

'Of course,' Gabrielle said.

'I am glad to hear you say "of course" so cordially,' Barbara Severance remarked. 'Women out in the world don't always fall in with our views.'

'I am not much in the world, but I don't see how anyone could object. Why should anyone object?'

'We don't admit any difference between man and woman,' Barbara explained. 'At least, I don't. I deny that nature intends us to admit any. I see that my friend Sara Crossley shakes her head; she has a different creed. She holds that man is the imperfect or lower or unfinished animal, and is destined to pass away altogether in time. Now, I don't admit that nature makes any imperfections.'

'But then you must allow me to say something on that, Barbara,' another lady interposed, speaking in a sweet, soft monotone. 'I deny altogether the existence of nature. What is nature in your sense?'

'Nature is a gas,' said a sharp little girl with round eyes.

'Nature, I should say,' Claudia interposed, 'is a movement; of course I only speak metaphorically and for the sake of being understood. The movement of the imperfect to resolve itself into the perfect is my interpretation of nature.'

'Would you not rather call it a tendency, Claudia?' a slender, fashionably dressed philosopher sweetly asked.

'Perhaps it would be a clearer way of conveying the idea

which you and I have in our minds, Sophia, if we were to call it a tendency,' Claudia replied. 'I gladly accept your correction, Sophia.'

'Not a correction, certainly, Claudia,' Sophia gently remonstrated. 'I do not presume to correct Claudia Lemuel. I understand my intellectual position better. But it does seem to me, that in your sense—which, pardon me, Jeannette'—to the lady of the monotone, 'I know is not yours—nature would be a tendency rather than a movement.'

Gabrielle did not find her ideas of the relations of man to his surroundings much cleared up by assuming nature to be a tendency rather than a movement. But it was evident that the compromise appeared to remove a difficulty from the way of some of the fair philosophers in Claudia's chambers, and she was glad that a point of agreement had been thus found early.

'We could hardly do better, I think,' one of the ladies now suggested, 'than ask Claudia to tell us what thoughts occur to her on the subject of nature as a tendency.'

A little murmur of approval went round the room. The lady who was addressed as Sara Crossley seemed to be somewhat of a disputatious turn, for she asked:

'On nature as a tendency as opposed to the theory of nature as a force? or nature as a tendency reconciled with nature as a force? It is of great importance to know precisely the point of view from which we are starting.'

Gabrielle thought it would be of the utmost importance for her if she could know precisely the point of view from which they were starting. But she almost began to despair of any such illumination. The lady with the sweet monotone spoke:

'For myself, I should of course say nature as a tendency in opposition to the doctrine of nature as a force. But I presume Claudia will claim to be allowed to regard the one doctrine as supplementary to the other.'

'Perhaps Claudia would tell us what her views are,' Gabrielle suggested, seeing that Claudia seemed only waiting for a chance to deliver her ideas of the truth.

'What I would say,' Claudia began, 'is this.' And then, standing close to her deal table with one hand resting on it, she poured forth in conversational tone and with a volubility that knew no pause or even check, a stream of words concerning nature and man. While she was speaking Gabrielle took occasion to glance round the room now and then and study the faces and heads of the little company. There were ten or a dozen women in all, not counting the hostess and her two ser-

vants. Small as the company was, it represented womanhood at all typical ages from sixteen to sixty. Some were married; some were decidedly pretty; some were fashionably dressed; very few were fairly of the class from which the caricaturist would select his illustration of the woman reformer. All looked intelligent; all spoke volubly; all seemed absorbed in earnestness; all seemed self-conceited; and yet all—and this most surprised Gabrielle—were patient of opposing opinions and gentle of speech. Every now and then Claudia purposely stopped, and then anyone who had a question to put or an objection to suggest was free to do so, and to be answered by Claudia or anybody else. What they spoke about Gabrielle did not always or often understand. So far as she could get at the general ideas of their discussion, it did not seem to her that it would be of the slightest consequence whether their opinions were all right or were all wrong. The question whether nature is a movement or only a tendency, and whether there is in actual fact anything to be properly described as nature, seemed fairly illustrative of the character of the discussion. 'What does it matter what nature is?'—the impatient and unphilosophic Gabrielle kept thinking. 'What does it matter, at all events, what we say it is? We don't change anything by that, or do anybody any good.' She found her hopes of receiving some valuable lessons of life from Claudia and her sisterhood fast deserting her. She was especially disappointed at not having heard any explanation of the doctrine of Pessimism, about which she had always been hearing much and learning nothing. Perhaps her face was too expressive wholly to conceal her anxiety to get to something on this subject, for the lady with the low monotone voice suddenly said:

'I beg pardon, Claudia; I am sure this lady'—gently indicating Gabrielle—'wishes to ask a question.'

'I didn't mean to interrupt,' Gabrielle said, feeling somewhat embarrassed when so many pairs of earnest feminine eyes were suddenly turned upon her. 'I was anxious perhaps to hear some explanation of the doctrine of Pessimism.'

'We have been drawn away from that subject,' Claudia explained, 'by the question as to the constitution of nature. We do not generally venture on more than one topic at a sitting.'

Gabrielle felt as if she had been doing wrong, and hastened to apologise. But a chorus of kindly voices assured her that the question was most welcome as showing her philosophic interest in the general subject, and it was at once arranged that the very next time Mrs. Vanthorpe chose to come, the question of Pessimism

should be the order of the day, to borrow the expression of our parliamentary assemblies.

‘In the mean time,’ said Claudia, ‘I may perhaps tell our friend that we all differ among ourselves here as to the true meaning of the doctrine of Pessimism. My own theory may be stated in a few words, reserving all examination of it for a future day.’

‘I should like to hear it of all things,’ Gabrielle said; ‘I should be the better prepared for the next time.’

‘My principle,’ Claudia began, ‘is this.’ Her friends listened with as much earnest interest as though the views of Claudia were absolutely new to them. ‘All the false philosophy and most of the evils and sufferings of life have come from the theory that the world was constructed for the best. My conviction is that everything on this earth was constructed for the worst—’

‘For the——?’ Gabrielle asked, not quite certain as to Claudia’s latest word.

‘For the worst. As a trial of strength for the great rescuing and reorganising force which is to regenerate man. Of course, I am not now stating the doctrine of Schopenhauer.’

‘Oh, no; no;’ a murmur went round the room, some tones implying that Claudia’s statement would, if accepted as an exposition of Schopenhauer, be doing an entire injustice to the principles of that philosopher; others conveying the impression that the murmurers renounced Schopenhauer and all his works and pomps.

‘I have nothing to do with Schopenhauer,’ Claudia explained. ‘I do not read his works any more. I have only given you my own theory as to Pessimism. On that point, as I have said, we all differ. But as to the regenerating and reorganising force by which man’s destiny is to be shaped aright on this earth, we have happily among us here no difference of opinion. We are all agreed as to that regenerating force.’

Gabrielle was delighted to hear of the agreement.

‘And the regenerating force?’ she ventured to ask.

Claudia looked round the room benignly; glanced up to the ceiling; partly closed her eyes; opened them again; and then, in the tone of one who breathes a prayer or speaks out some solemn and sacred oracle, uttered the word ‘Woman.’

‘Oh,’ said Gabrielle. She felt a little disappointed. She had tolerably lofty notions of her own concerning the mission of woman; but to set her up as the one regenerating force seemed expecting rather too much of poor woman, who had such a great deal to do otherwise. Gabrielle did not somehow see how she, for example, as one woman, was to set about the work of regeneration, starting now at once from Claudia’s chambers. The

mission seemed a little unsatisfactory or undefined to her energetic and impatient spirit. She wanted something to be doing, something to be going on with, meanwhile.

She took leave of Claudia and her friends not without a feeling of admiration and of pity for them. She learned that they met thus Sunday after Sunday and studied the problems of man's destiny and the way to regenerate man, poor fellow. They discussed theories about nature and the future world, and the mission of humanity; and they were profoundly if earnest about everything, and they sincerely believed they were beginning a new order of things. Each one was a little celebrity, a little poetess or priestess, among her fellows. So far as Gabrielle could see, they appeared to have no jealousies, no spites, no intolerance. So far as she could conjecture, they were absolutely unconcerned as to the praise or blame of man; it was all the same to them whether the creature whom they were pledged to regenerate cared about their plans or was laughing at them. Indeed, the idea that anybody ever made a joke about anything did not seem to enter their heads. The women all appeared to be fond of each other. 'I never read a satire yet,' Gabrielle said to herself, 'in which women were not shown as hating each other. I never heard of a sect or school without jealousies and quarrels. Is this the one exception? And if it is, what a satire in itself! Behold, here is a sect in which there is no hatred, no intolerance; a society in which the women are all fond of each other, and never quarrel; and it is collected together in a little back room up several flights of stairs, and no mortal could make out what its members want to do, or what they are talking about.'

'I wonder is all philosophy like that, if one only knew?' she thought. She was driving homewards now. Suddenly looking out of the window of her little carriage she saw a boy carrying a cage, and in the cage was a white mouse going round and round in his little wheel with much noise and tremendous energy of purpose, but making no progress. 'Or like that?' she suddenly asked of herself.

• CHAPTER XVII.

'I CLAIM YOU AS THE SISTER OF MY SOUL.'

GABRIELLE soon put aside her doubts as to the virtues of philosophy. Her thoughts turned on the death of Philip Vanthorpe and the promise Fielding had got from her that she would not move to find his widow until she had first heard from him. She was thinking much as to the meaning of all this, and thinking too of the curious chance that had thrown Fielding in her way. When she reached her home, occupied perhaps more than usual

with her own thoughts, she did not observe that Miss Elvin was in a very depressed mood. The singer had not only spent her day at home for nothing, but had the dissatisfaction of knowing that Walter Taxal had called, and not finding Gabrielle at home had gone away, her brother had not come, she told Gabrielle, and she was disappointed; for if she had known he was not coming it would have delighted her to go to Claudia Lemuel's.

Gabrielle's maid here told her that a lady who had called twice to see her, while she was out, had come now again, and was waiting in another room.

'Such an odd-looking woman; I saw her for a moment,' Miss Elvin said; 'she seems a strange sort of person, like a foreigner, and not at all like a lady.'

'Very likely a foreigner,' said Gabrielle coldly: 'but why not a lady too, Gertrude?'

'Oh, I don't know; I never think foreign women are ladies.' Since her transplantation from Camberwell the young singer had grown nicely critical of the ways of those who would try to be ladies.

Gabrielle went to see her visitor, who was waiting for her in the room where we first met Miss Elvin herself; the room where Gabrielle had received Fielding, and which had the portrait of Albert Vanthorpe resting on the chimney-piece. Gabrielle was in the habit of receiving visits from all sorts of women coming with all manner of appeals and proposals. It was one of her principles never to refuse to see anyone who wished to see her on Sunday or other day, unless some engagement made it absolutely impossible to receive the visitor. It is marvellous how soon it gets known in London that there is someone, man or woman, in any street or quarter, with a benevolent turn and a little money. Gabrielle might have been the Countess of Monte Christo, so beset was she with letters and visits from persons who desired her assistance for some private need, or for some grand project designed to benefit the whole human race. At times she was almost inclined to believe that such persons must have a way of making a mark on the outer wall or the little gate of her tiny demesne, as professional beggars are said to do, whereby others in the same profession were admonished that piteous appeals would have a good chance there. Her fortune was but a modest property at the best; and she might have bestowed it all away in any one week if she had entertained all the proposals made by enthusiasts of her own sex within that space of time. Therefore she was now

getting used to all sorts of visitors, even to those whose humours were emphasised by a strong dash of insanity. Yet there was something about the aspect of this particular visitor which filled her with a strange sense of repugnance and almost of alarm. The woman was showily dressed, was tall and handsome. Her draperies trailed all over the hearth; her chains and bracelets and bangles rattled and clanked; there was something tempestuous about her motions that seemed uncomfortable and overwhelming to ordinary nerves. But beyond all this the moment Gabrielle saw the woman the thought flashed upon her, 'Now I am going to hear something unpleasant.'

The tall woman threw back her veil and showed a decidedly handsome face, where the remains of youth still struggled against the too conspicuous efforts of art to repair them. What indeed can be witness of decay so conclusive as restoration?

'I am speaking to Gabrielle Vanthorpe,' the visitor said, in tones that might have expressed long pent-up affection for Gabrielle Vanthorpe, or a passionate hope that Gabrielle Vanthorpe was to give her sanctuary from some danger which had chased her up to that very door.

'My name is Gabrielle Vanthorpe.'

'You were the wife of Albert Vanthorpe?'

'I was.'

'Do you remember Philip Vanthorpe, his elder brother, who went away?'

Gabrielle began to have a sickening presentiment of the revelation that was coming. She instinctively fought it off as long as she could, and only answered:

'I don't remember him; I don't think I ever saw him: he was several years older than my husband; he went away before I used to be much at his mother's house.'

'Do you know that he is dead?'

'I have heard so lately.'

'Do you know who I am?'

Gabrielle perhaps could have guessed now, but she did not guess; her visitor gave her no time.

'We are sisters—as good as sisters, anyhow. I am Paulina Vanthorpe; I am the widow of your husband's brother. Won't you kiss me, Gabrielle?' And she swooped on Gabrielle with rush of silks and rattle of bracelets.

Gabrielle kissed her, closing her eyes as she did so, for the sight of the unmistakable paint became too much for nearer endurance. Nor was the sight all; the fervent embrace to which Gabrielle was subjected left a distinct taste of the paint behind it.

'Oh, I shall love you, Gabrielle!' the enthusiastic stranger exclaimed. 'I feel quite like loving you already, Gabrielle! Lord, what a sweet pretty name! My name too—Paulina—ain't it a pretty name? I mean, isn't it a pretty name, Gabrielle? Oh, we must love each other; and we shall, I know; we shall be real sisters, I know already. Won't you call me Paulina?'

'Will you sit down—Paulina?' Gabrielle said, not without some little difficulty in bringing herself to the name. When Fielding saw Paulina in the Surrey house his first thought was of how Gabrielle Vanthorpe could endure such a sister-in-law. Now Gabrielle's first thought was for Mrs. Leven—how could she endure such a daughter-in-law?

'Yes, I'll sit down; thank you, you're very-kind, I'm sure,' said Paulina.

'This is strange news to me,' Gabrielle began to explain, feeling that her lack of enthusiasm perhaps might have called for some explanation. 'I was not quite prepared for it; it comes on me by surprise; I did not even know until very lately that my husband's brother was married.'

'Oh, bless you, yes; very much married indeed. He wasn't at all the sort of person to remain long unmarried; why, I think they were all a marrying family the Vanthorpes. Phil often told me his mother married when she was only seventeen, was only eighteen when he was born, I believe. Your Vanthorpe must have been precious young when he married you; I don't wonder at his impatience, I'm sure. I was only eighteen when poor Phil talked me into marrying him—oh, quite a chit of a thing; didn't know what I was doing one bit. He talked me into it, said his mother would love me when she came to know me. I wonder if she will? He didn't seem to be so sure of it afterwards. I never saw the old lady, of course.'

'Mrs. Leven is not an old lady,' Gabrielle said. The buoyant Paulina's way of talking about all the family was something quite new to Gabrielle.

'Bless your heart, I know. That's only my way of talking. I know all about her age. My Phil was only twenty-eight when he died, or twenty-nine perhaps; I don't quite remember at the moment, but I could soon tell if I thought it over. You don't doubt my story, I hope?' she said, suddenly turning her large eyes on Gabrielle, whose hesitation was beginning to impress her.

'No,' Gabrielle said, 'I cannot doubt your story—and I suppose you could bring me proof enough if I did doubt it.'

'Proof? Look here. There's Phil Vanthorpe's likeness—

see if it isn't the own brother of that picture standing over the fireplace there. Look at what's written under the little likeness: "From Philip Vanthorpe to his beloved wife."

Paulina, after much fumbling about her exuberant person, had produced a photograph in a handsome case which she handed to Gabrielle; 'done in New Orleans—Canal Street, New Orleans—at one of the best photographers in the city,' she added. There could be no doubt that the photographed face bore a strong resemblance to that of Albert Vanthorpe and of Mrs. Leven too. There could be no doubt that the words 'From Philip Vanthorpe to his beloved wife' were written on the lower-margin of the photograph in a small hand, which seemed to Gabrielle to resemble in character that of Albert Vanthorpe.

'And if you have any doubts on the matter you can ask Mr. Fielding. You know Mr. Fielding?' Paulina fixed a very keen and scrutinising gaze on Gabrielle.

'Yes, I know Mr. Fielding.'

'Very well; he knew all about us. My husband and he were like brothers. Why, he and I were more like brother and sister than anything you can imagine; it was always Paulina here and Paulina there. You can ask him all about me; he'll tell you if I am Mrs. Vanthorpe or not. Oh, it's all right enough. I'm Mrs. Vanthorpe as sure as you are Mrs. Albert.'

Indeed Gabrielle had no doubt of the truth of the woman's story: she felt in her own heart that it was only too true. Now she could understand Fielding's hesitation and the promise he had exacted from her.

'I have lots of poor Phil's letters and things, you know, over at the place where I am lodging,' Paulina said. 'I only want to satisfy you, Gabrielle; the sooner it's done the better for me, for I want to feel as if we were sisters. I feel like a sister to you already, but I don't think you feel so to me; and I think that's unkind of you, Gabrielle.'

A tear or two began to shine in the eyes of the misprized Paulina; the tears however would not be allowed to descend upon her cheeks, because the cheeks were made up for the visit, and must not be furrowed.

Gabrielle began to feel touched and to be conscience-smitten. She remembered how she had told Fielding that she did not care whether Philip Vanthorpe's wife was a woman of education or not, and now she was already acting in disregard of her own principles, or at least she was thinking in disregard of them. 'How can this poor creature help it,' she asked of herself, 'if she has not been well brought up? She seems to have a warm

heart, and my husband's brother loved her. Am I going to close my heart against her when she has no one else?' For it occurred to her, even in that moment of some confusion, that Mrs. Leven would never consent to take such a daughter-in-law to her arms.

'Don't think me unkind—Paulina; pray don't. I am only a little confused—you can understand this is so new to me. If you are the widow of my husband's brother—yes, I am sure you are, I don't mean to throw any doubt on that—you must be like a sister to me. You will tell me what you want done that I can do, and you will stay with me for the present. You know that unfortunately the mother of both our husbands, Mrs. Leven, has set her heart against me, and that I never see her—and she so loved me once.' Gabrielle's own grievance began to moisten her eyes.

'Yes, I have heard something of that. It's bad for you and for me, I suppose. I have much more of a claim on her than I have on you,' the candid Paulina observed. 'You can't take me to see her, then? I should like to go with you ever so much: you could say things for me better than I could say them for myself.'

'No, Paulina, I can't take you to her; I don't know what I can do; but you will let me think it over, won't you? I am sure some good inspiration will guide us in the end to do the right thing.'

'Just so,' said Paulina, nodding complacently; 'when we put our heads together we'll get at the right end of things.'

'And you will stay with me for the present? This house must be your home until you find one that has a better claim on you; and you must tell me all your story. Remember, I know almost nothing of my husband's brother; he never allowed his mother to know anything about him.'

'That was because of me, I dare say. I wasn't a grand person, Gabrielle, as you can easily see; I had no merit but that I loved the poor boy, and I suppose he didn't like his mother to have a chance of showing that she looked down upon his wife. That was his way, you know: he had plenty of spirit, poor Phil.'

Whether it was art or nature that dictated to Paulina this way of putting her case, the appeal went straight home to the heart of Gabrielle. The thought of the woman who had loved and cared for Philip Vanthorpe, and who had been loved by him, being now cast off and despised by any member of Philip Vanthorpe's family, while he who would have protected

her was lying in his far grave, was more than Gabrielle's spirit could endure. She felt in a mood to do battle for Paulina against a whole armed and bristling world of conventionalities and respectabilities; in a temper to wish that she, and she alone, had the battle to fight. She kissed Paulina again spontaneously, paint and all, without wincing. She did not heed now the look or the taste of the paint. 'What is paint itself but a question of conventionality? Every woman wore it at one time,' Gabrielle thought. 'One's heart isn't painted.'

'Your husband was right, Paulina,' Gabrielle said earnestly. 'He was right in not allowing you to humble yourself even for his mother. But I wish he had written to his brother—or to me. I wouldn't have shown any such feeling—well, it is too late to talk of all that now. We must be sisters, Paulina; we are sisters in our widowhood already. You will tell me all about your life——'

'I will tell you everything,' Paulina said fervently, and highly amused within herself at the idea of her making such a revelation.

'You will stay here to-night?'

'Oh, I shall be ever so happy!'

'But your child?' Gabrielle said, betinking her. 'You have a child? Where is he?'

'Oh, the child! Dear creature, bless his heart, he is well taken care of. He won't mind for once.'

'He will miss his mother, won't he? Can't we send for him? It will be no trouble.'

'Thank you, no, it isn't worth while. He is ever so well off. He is almost fonder of his nurse than of me. He would miss her more than me; we'll see about him to-morrow.'

Gabrielle was a little surprised, but said nothing more, and it was settled that Paulina should abide that night with Gabrielle as a mere preliminary of sisterhood and in order that Paulina might confide to her the whole of her story; and next day they were to take more deliberate counsel as to what should further be done. Gabrielle felt sadly in lack of some one to advise her. She assumed that Paulina must be poor. Paulina herself had implied all that. It seemed a monstrous thing that Philip Vanthorpe's wife and child should be in any manner of distress while Philip Vanthorpe's mother was rich; and yet Gabrielle, with all her romance and chivalry, could not picture to herself Mrs. Leven doing anything for a woman like Paulina except on condition of Paulina's removing herself far out of Mrs. Leven's range. Gabrielle's heart was filled with premature

anger at the thought of such a compromise being offered to poor Paulina.

The presence of Paulina was not made less perplexing by the fact that Miss Elvin was staying with Gabrielle. It was necessary to tell the young singer that the odd-looking person whose appearance had amused her so much was the widow of Gabrielle's husband's brother, just come from the Southern States of America to seek the family whom she had never seen before. Miss Elvin received Paulina with hardly disguised wonder and scorn, and at once set her down as the very type and model of the Yankee woman; Yankee being in Miss Elvin's vocabulary every American from Lake Superior to the Gulf of Mexico; Paulina carrying low London in every movement and accent so plainly that the sense ached at it. Paulina made elaborate excuses for not appearing at dinner in proper dinner-dress, explaining with needless iteration how she had not come with the least idea of staying, but only to see what Gabrielle was like and whether they could get on together, and how she was that independent that if she hadn't liked Gabrielle, and hadn't thought Gabrielle liked her, she wouldn't have remained a moment in the house.

'But I do like her. I took to her from the first; I saw she was just my style from the moment I looked into her eyes,' the effusive Paulina went on. 'Real jam, I call her. This young lady don't understand what real jam is, I see. Nor you neither, Gabrielle, I dare say?' She laughed at the notion of their ignorance.

'I don't know what it means,' Gabrielle said in a disheartened tone, as of one who had no profound anxiety to learn.

'Pray do explain,' Miss Elvin urged. She had already convinced herself that Gabrielle was dying with shame because of this dreadful sister-in-law, and she was anxious to draw Paulina out as much as possible in order that Gabrielle's pride might have the fall which she considered providentially due to it. 'It is some American expression, I suppose? Is it Mark Twain?'

'Well, now that is funny!' Paulina explained. 'That I should come all this way to teach London slang to you two London ladies! Why, that's a London saying, real jam is. It's the music-halls, I think; and you a singer too, and you didn't know that!'

'I don't sing at the music-halls,' Miss Elvin said in a tone of infinite scorn.

'No? They get a good screw at the music-halls, I'm to'd. Some first-class artists came out of the music-halls too. But

I'm not American, you know, I'm English to the back-bone; I'm a regular cockney; born within sound of Bow Bells. My poor Phil had a notion—one of his odd ideas—that nobody ever was born in London; and it is curious, if you ask people, how you find almost everyone you ask was born in the provinces. But I always told him his notion wouldn't wash; for I was born within the sound of Bow Bells themselves.'

Paulina's apologies for her lack of proper dinner-dress were not only superfluous, but had the inconvenient effect of drawing attention to the fact that her get-up, such as it was, displayed a good deal of gorgeousness, and contrasted with the pre-Raphaelite dead colouring and scant ornament of Miss Elvin's attire, and the extreme simplicity of Gabrielle's dress. Further, Paulina had contrived to extemporise a sort of imitation dinner-toilette, according to her idea of its requirements, by turning in a considerable portion of the neck and front of her dress, and so managing to make a very respectable display of bust crossed and recrossed with massy chains of gold. Paulina drank a great deal of wine at dinner; and for Gabrielle and Miss Elvin wine was rather an ornamental accessory of the dinner-table than a part of the meal. She also asked for soda-water, and for a little brandy to compound with it. She had a very vigorous, healthy appetite; and her capacity for the consumption of sweets proved to be something remarkable. When Gabrielle's maid was a little slow about the opening of the soda-water, Paulina good-naturedly said, 'Hand it over, my dear; I fancy I can do that better than you can,' and made her boast good by proving that she could do it a great deal better.

'I can open a bottle of soda or a bottle of fizz,' Paulina said with well-founded pride, 'and never as much as wink.'

It was a trying evening for all three. But it would surely have surprised Gabrielle if she could have known that it was most of all trying to Paulina, who ate and drank with such an appearance of content and relish. Paulina had a hard struggle many a time to keep down her temper, and not to have what she would have called a flare-out. She saw in a moment that the little sallow-girl, as she called Miss Elvin, was giving herself airs and looking down on her. And she thought, with a fierce longing for the chance, how short a time it would take her to knock the conceit out of the girl. Then even Gabrielle's sweet and kindly ways sometimes aroused in her a spirit of antagonism. 'Why is she any better than me, I want to know?' she mentally asked herself. 'I haven't had any bringing up; if I had, I dare say I should be just as good and just as much

of a lady as her.' But Paulina was for the present playing a part; and she was determined to play it out. As she boasted to Fielding, she was quite clever enough to take on any part that might best commend her to the people she sought to please; and she thought she had hit upon the best way to 'fetch' Gabrielle, as she would herself have put it. She knew that the one part she could not sustain was that of a lady. The moment she spoke to Gabrielle she saw that it would be of no use attempting any imitation of the part with her. She had thought for a moment of doing the high tragedy; but she fancied she saw something in Gabrielle's manner that would have made that attempt unpromising. In another moment or two her genuine natural cleverness enabled her to get at the reality of Gabrielle's character. She saw its simplicity, its generosity, its chivalry, if we may apply such a word to a woman's nature, its Quixotry. 'At the age of two,' she said to herself, 'I wasn't as innocent as that. Lord, how could I be!' She made up her mind at once. The part of a kind-hearted, unaffected, untaught woman was the thing for Gabrielle, she felt certain. Not goody-goody, but honest and good-natured. A frank confession of humble bringing-up and lack of education, and an appeal to the generosity of Gabrielle not to be ashamed of her because she hadn't had a bringing-up—that, she thought, was the card to play. She played it accordingly; and she saw that things were going on very well. But there were moments when the performance came a little hard upon her. She remembered a night when she flung a woman on the floor in New Orleans and trampled on her. If Miss Gertrude Elvin could have known how often this pleasant recollection was passing through the mind of her companion at Gabrielle's table, and how the past triumph was re-enacted in imagination with her for its victim, she would have found the little banquet far less agreeable even than it actually was.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PAULINA STOOPS TO CONQUER.

THE day after the arrival of the unexpected guest at Gabrielle's, Fielding—perhaps we may still describe him simply as we have always hitherto known him—was on his way to pay a visit to Paulina's hostess. One result of Gabrielle's good offices between the brothers naturally was to place Fielding in the position of a recognised friend. The new phase of Fielding's existence was very delightful to him. He would in any case

probably have enjoyed the novelty of it as he did most novelties; and would have liked the West-end London life if only as a change after the Southern States and Bolingbroke Place. But he had now one or two particular reasons for liking the change.

He was greatly touched by his brother's way of receiving him, and of renewing their affection, or rather making way for an affection which before had had no chance of existence. Nothing could have been less like what Fielding might have expected than the ways of his brother towards him. If Wilberforce had discovered some entirely new and incomparable way of lighting his house, he could not have been more pleased than he was with the novelty of having a brother. He was never done talking to all the people he knew about 'my brother, don't you know?—my brother Clarkson; just come back from somewhere; splendid fellow: you positively must know him.' He took Clarkson all over his town house from garret to basement, to show him all the recent improvements. He proposed to take him down to his country place presently, where there were still greater wonders to be exhibited, for the genius of practical science had to do there with gardens, grounds, and game, horses and stables, dogs and kennels, as well as with fireplaces and windows. Meantime, he hurried him down to Sydenham to show him a little place he had there quite near the Crystal Palace, and where he was trying plans for the acclimatisation of various foreign shrubs and flowers. He was always telling Clarkson they must have a long talk over old times together; but the long talk never seemed likely to come off, for whenever they were alone Wilberforce had always some new device in the way of industrial science on which to consult his brother. He persisted in the assumption that a man who had been in so many foreign countries as Clarkson must be an authority on all subjects connected with the building, furnishing, lighting, and ventilating of houses.

Fielding fell into all this in his usual companionable way. He declared that he was getting already softened and spoiled by civilisation; and he persisted in retaining his old lodging in Bolingbroke Place, and in going there to pass a night when he felt inclined. But for the present at least he was in a manner taken captive by his brother's kindness and good-fellowship, and he liked the new life remarkably well. He was always saying to himself that such a life would never suit him, that he was made for a gipsy or a tramp; and he was always making up his mind that he must go somewhere and do something to-

morrow. But meantime he was like that son of Cato the younger, of whom the epigram set forth that he had passed we know not how many days in going to-morrow.

One other novelty in which Sir Wilberforce took a manifest and undisguised delight was the society of Gabrielle. He made up his mind to go to Lady Honeybell's whenever there was a chance of her being there; and he called to see her sometimes at her own house, and talked a great deal with her whenever he had the opportunity. Fielding was generally with him on these occasions, and therefore grew to be quite an established friend of Gabrielle's. It sometimes seemed to her as if she surely must have known him for years instead of a few weeks.

This particular day, however, Fielding set out to call on Gabrielle without his brother. He was anxious to speak to her about the Vanthorpe affair. He had heard or come at the knowledge of something which made him more than ever suspicious of Paulina's movements and purposes, and he thought it would be of great importance to put Gabrielle on her guard. He little suspected that at the very time when he was making his way to Gabrielle's with this object, his name was on the lips of her and of the woman from whom he would if possible have kept her wide as the poles apart.

If Gabrielle Vanthorpe had been dealing in unholy arts, and had conjured up, to scare her friends, some abhorrent phantom she could not now exorcise and banish, she could hardly have felt more painfully responsible and self-reproachful. She thought with sickening misgivings of the part she had taken, slight as it was, in bringing up the spectre of Paulina to vex the future life of Mrs. Leven. Why did she meddle or make in the matter? she kept asking herself. True, it was at no call of hers, and by no quest of hers, that the extraordinary Paulina presented herself. But Gabrielle had long been wishing to find some trace of Philip Vanthorpe, and had thought, not surely in any ignoble way, to find her own account in it by commending herself to his mother; and now she seemed like some unlucky creature who, by a single unhallowed wish, has summoned an unwelcome apparition that will never cease to haunt. Every hour she spent in Paulina's company more and more convinced her that it would be absolutely impossible to induce Mrs. Leven to endure such a daughter-in-law. If she could only believe Paulina to be an impostor—but there was no use in thinking of such a thing. Paulina had referred to Fielding as a witness to the truth of her story. Indeed, it

would be impossible to doubt it. She had told Gabrielle a hundred things about Philip Vanthorpe's younger days and his quarrels with his mother, of which Gabrielle remembered to have heard in a vague half-hushed sort of way before, and which certainly Paulina could only have heard from Vanthorpe himself.

There was something uncomfortable, uncanny about the woman which made her companionship more oppressive to Gabrielle than any mere lack of education or good manners could have done. There was something sinister about her when the surface of good-heartedness was ruffled for a moment by any hint of contradiction. Gabrielle had seen her eyebrows contract and a light flash from her eyes once or twice as she looked at Miss Elvin, which had alarming suggestions about it—as of the cage of a wild animal or a maniac's cell. Then, where was the child? It was now well on in the afternoon of the day after her arrival, and Paulina did not appear particularly anxious about the child. The whole world seemed to have grown perplexed for Gabrielle since this ill-omened visitor came inside her threshold. Yet to her Paulina was only exuberant good-nature and gratitude.

‘I must do something, I must send for some one—take some one's advice,’ the troubled Gabrielle thought. ‘Major Leven?—Mr. Fielding, surely, would be better.’

‘Had I not better write a line to Mr. Fielding, and ask him to come and see you, Paulina?’ Gabrielle asked. They two were alone. ‘He will wish to see you, and you will like to see him.’

‘Law, Gabrielle, send for him as soon as you like, if it's any case to your mind, my dear; if you don't feel quite sure about yours truly, Fielding will soon give you satisfaction on that point. He can't deny that I am myself, anyhow; he can't say that this girl isn't the wife of Philip Vanthorpe. But don't send for him on my account, I beg of you, nor on his, my dear. We don't particularly want to see each other, I can tell you.’

‘But he was such a friend of your husband——?’

‘Just so; but the friend of the husband isn't always the friend of the wife, dear; especially if the wife should happen to be too fond of the husband. Any how, Master Fielding don't like me now; I dare say he won't have a good word for me; but send for him as soon as ever you like, Gabrielle; I see it would be something of a satisfaction to you, and I don't blame you. Why should you take my word? although I know I

could take your word for anything, once I looked into your eyes. Send for Fielding, dear, right away. It don't matter to me at all. We are not very good friends; but we shan't come to words in your presence, I dare say.'

Gabrielle found this sort of talk unendurable.

'Perhaps if I were to consult Major Leven——'

'That's the husband of the old lady?'

'Please, Paulina, don't call Mrs. Leven the old lady. I don't like it; she is not old.'

'That's only my way, Gabrielle dear. You'll not mind me when you have known me a longer time.'

Gabrielle's heart sank at the suggestion.

'Mrs. Leven is a lady many people find it difficult to deal with,' Gabrielle explained. 'She is a noble woman at heart, but she has strong predilections—strong likings and dislikings, I mean.'

'I'll bring her to reason, depend upon it. Ain't I her eldest son's wife?'

'Yes, but then you must remember, Paulina, that her son left her very early, and she may not admit any claim on her; and she is married again—and I think we had better make our appeal to her feelings and her heart.'

'You leave it to me, my dear: I'll bring her to reason soon enough,' the complacent Paulina said. 'The sooner she falls in with my views and the quieter she keeps me, the less talk and exposure there will be, don't you see? Folks like her don't like family affairs talked of.'

'I don't think that would have much effect on Mrs. Leven, Paulina; it would not have any on me,' Gabrielle said firmly.

Paulina was afraid she had been going too far.

'Oh, for that matter,' she said softly, 'I am well aware I haven't any sort of claim on you, Gabrielle, only what your kind heart and your nature give. You are very good to take me on my own word even. You have been only too good already. The moment you say "go," I'll go, Gabrielle; and I shall still owe you good will for some happy, happy hours of shelter and kindness.'

At this moment it was announced to Gabrielle that Mr. Fielding had called. She hailed his coming with delight.

'Here is Mr. Fielding, Paulina; we will see him at once. I am so glad!'

'Now for a nice piece of acting,' thought Paulina.

Gabrielle went forward to welcome Fielding with special cordiality. The room was somewhat darkened, for the summer

was growing on, and Paulina, for all her Southern experiences, declared that she could not bear the sun. Fielding did not at once see who was with Gabrielle, although her manner made him sure that she had something out of the common to say to him.

'You have come at the very time when we wanted you, Mr. Fielding,' the almost breathless Gabrielle said. 'You see I have an old friend of yours with me. You have not forgotten this lady?'

'If you have forgotten me I shall take it unkind of you, Fielding,' the lady said for herself, half rising from her chair in a languid way. And Fielding saw that the woman whom it was his special effort to keep from touching Gabrielle with even the slightest contact was under her roof and seated in closest companionship with her. His mind went back in a moment to some of the scenes of Philip Vanthorpe's later life; to the fierce quarrels he had himself witnessed; to what he had seen with his own eyes of Paulina's savage temper, animal love of food and drink, revolting coquetry, and almost brutal vulgarity; and as he now saw her by Gabrielle's side, his first wild feeling was regret that she was not a man whom he could thrust by force from that sweet and gracious home.

He did not even speak to Gabrielle at first.

'How did you come here?' he asked sternly of the unabashed Paulina.

'I came to see my sister-in-law, Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe—why shouldn't I come to see her? She is not ashamed of me because I wasn't well brought up and wasn't born a lady. And why? Because she's a lady herself.'

'How on earth did you find her out?' he asked, turning to Gabrielle. 'I thought you gave me your promise——'

'I have not broken any promise,' Gabrielle said, rather coldly. His manner was a little too sharp, she thought. It was hardly the manner he ought to assume to any woman. 'My sister-in-law is here of her own wish. She came to see me; and I have welcomed her.'

'Who told you her name?' he now addressed himself once more to Paulina. 'How did you get to know it?'

'I don't suppose my whereabouts was very hard to find out, Mr. Fielding,' Gabrielle said, still cold in her manner towards him. 'There is a London directory; and the name of Vanthorpe is not quite so common as that of Smith.'

'But she never knew your name.'

'My name is her name, Mr. Fielding.'

'Yes, yes, it is now; of course it is her name by right—but

she never knew it. She never heard the name of Vanthorpe; she was always called Clarkson; it was a whim of poor Philip's to suppress his own name—a whim at first, but after his marriage a very serious purpose. When I saw her the other day I told her that no one but myself knew anything about the whole story, and that I would not tell her your name unless on conditions—that she knows.'

'That's all true enough, Gabrielle,' Paulina said meekly. 'My poor husband did go by the name of Clarkson out in the States; but I don't see what's the odds of that now. I was Philip Vanthorpe's wife, Mr. Fielding, his lawful wife; you won't deny that?'

'You were his wife; that's only too true.'

'Well,' said Gabrielle, interposing, 'I think that is all I want to know, Mr. Fielding. She was the lawful wife of my husband's brother: she loved him, and he loved her, and he is dead; and she comes to me. Let others do as they like, I'll not refuse to own her, and she shall always be welcome here.'

Paulina seized Gabrielle's hand and covered it with kisses, and then pressed it to her breast. Fielding made a movement as if he would pluck the hand away. But he stopped.

'Stuff! play-acting!' were his genial words.

'I told you, Gabrielle,' Paulina said; 'I said Mr. Fielding didn't like me. I told you he would not have a good word for me; he was always trying to make my husband distrust me. He knows why he don't like me, and I know it too; but let that pass.'

Fielding was about to break in angrily upon her. But he checked himself. He was not going to wrangle with such a woman in that presence; or to condescend to vindicate his motives or his conduct by a word.

'Let that pass,' Paulina hurried on, seeing with joy that she was gaining something of an advantage. 'I can be generous if he can't. The only thing I told you that he couldn't do, Gabrielle, was that he couldn't deny that I was Philip Vanthorpe's wife, and that Phil Vanthorpe loved me. You see he don't deny it, and you see he would deny it if he could.'

'Yes,' said Fielding, who saw that remonstrance was now useless, 'I would deny it if I could; I only wish I could.'

'You see!' Paulina exclaimed triumphantly.

'Now, Mr. Fielding,' Gabrielle said, returning to composure not without an effort, 'you see our minds are made up here, and I am sure you have too much sense to think of arguing with women when they tell you they have made up their minds.'

I hoped my sister-in-law would have found a warmer friend in you; but I am glad that at least you don't refuse to help her to establish her identity. I want your advice about her. I am sure you will give me good advice.'

'Yes; I will give you good advice; but will you take it when it is given?'

'I should like first to know what it is; I don't intend to commit myself, Mr. Fielding.'

'My advice is this—about your brother's wife I have only one advice to offer—'

'Shall I leave the room, Gabrielle?' Paulina asked. 'I don't mind at all. You can talk about me more freely, perhaps, when I'm not in the way.'

'No, no; you must stay,' Gabrielle said.

'I had rather you heard what I have to say,' Fielding added. 'My advice is this—don't have this woman staying in your house. Buy her off, if you will—I don't advise it, but if you like buy her off, or get Mrs. Leven to buy her off; but don't keep her under your roof. She is not a woman to be a companion of yours; I am not talking now about what she calls her character. If she were as good as the goddess Diana in that sort of way, she is not a companion for you; and I tell you some harm will come of having her near you. Do anything you will in the way of kindness or charity; but don't allow her to remain in your house.'

'What has he to say against me?' Paulina asked still in her meek fashion. 'Let him say anything he will, Gabrielle; I don't mind; I'm not afraid. Ask him what he has to say against me: it's only fair he should speak out.'

'Yes, that seems only fair, Mr. Fielding,' Gabrielle said. 'I believe men always hold to some principle of not insinuating a charge without giving one a chance of defending himself; is there not some such principle among you? Why should I not be a friend to one who is so nearly connected with me, and who wants my friendship? Would you act so in such a case?'

'I hope I should listen to the sincere advice of one who knew more than I could know—'

'No, Mr. Fielding; you would do nothing of the kind. I don't believe you would; I am sure you would not. You would never turn your back on anyone whom you ought to care for merely because of some vague hints and objections. You would not do it; neither will I.'

'I suppose it is useless,' Fielding said warmly, 'to expect a woman to listen to reason.'

'See the way you treat us !' Gabrielle said, speaking quickly and with an emotion that now and then seemed likely to stop her speaking altogether. 'We are never done hearing that women have no principles of honour, and fair-play, and all the rest of it ; that they listen to stories told behind people's backs, and hit people when they are down ; and that only men are open and fair, and meet things face to face, and I don't know what else ! And when we try to act on your principles of manly fair dealing, see what comes of it ! Then you tell us that we never can be reasonable, because we don't simply do as we are told, and cast off anyone who has a claim on us without asking why or wherefore ; because some man chooses to say she is not worthy of your help, but I won't tell you why ! You can't have all of us this way, Mr. Fielding ; you must take some of us one way or the other. I choose to act on your own principles ; and I will stand by a friend like a man.'

Gabrielle looked exceedingly unlike a man at this moment. Her eyes were sparkling with tears, and her voice was all tremulous ; and she looked strikingly handsome and intensely feminine. She took Paulina's hand the while and turned towards Fielding with a look of something like defiance.

'I should like you to stand by your friend,' he said, 'if that was all ; I am not a man to turn my back on a friend or advise anyone else to do such a thing. But is she your friend ? You see her for the first time ; you know nothing about her—I do ! She broke poor Philip Vanthorpe's heart.'

'It's not true,' Paulina protested in tones of injured and melancholy innocence. 'He died in my arms. If he were alive you wouldn't talk in this way. But I don't want to make any quarrels, Gabrielle, between you and your respectable friends. I ain't a respectable person, I know, in that sense ; I am only a poor woman whom Philip Vanthorpe loved and made his wife.'

'Stuff !' interjected the ungracious Fielding.

'I'll go away, Gabrielle ; I'll go away. God bless you always, anyhow ; for you believed me and were kind to me.'

'You shall not go,' Gabrielle said ; 'you shall stay with me ; you are my sister-in-law, and you shall have a home here as long as you want one.'

'Look here,' Fielding said, turning suddenly on the now flushed Paulina, 'what will you take to go away ? what is your sum ? It will come to that in time—why not give us the figure at once ?'

'You don't understand me, Mr. Fielding,' Paulina replied

in a tone of noble scorn. 'You never did. You mistook me in more ways than one. What is my price to go away? I'll tell you. One word from the lady of this house. Let this lady say the word "go," and I'm gone. Now you have your answer. These are my terms.'

'I say stay,' Gabrielle declared; 'I say you shall not go. And now surely we need not say any more about all this? I am sorry if you are offended, Mr. Fielding, or if I seemed angry. I am sure you meant well and kindly; but you don't understand women.'

'That he don't,' interjected Paulina.

'We have some principles of fair-play, and we have our code of chivalry. I heard you talk once of somebody with whom it would not be safe to go tiger-hunting. He would back out, I suppose, in the moment of danger, and leave his friend in the lurch. Well, I think there are women you might go tiger-hunting with; I am one.'

Fielding remembered the illustration to which she was referring in her emotional way. It was, indeed, rather a favourite illustration of his own. It was meant to picture the kind of man who, good and worthy enough in other ways, could not be trusted to stay by his friend to the last out of pure companionship and loyalty. It touched him now to hear her cite his own words even in objection to himself.

'One thing will you do?' he asked. 'Will you put her a plain question—where is Philip Vanthorpe's child?'

'I do not mean to ask her any question now,' Gabrielle replied. 'She will tell me all that I want to know, I am sure, time enough. I think she has had questioning enough for one day.'

Gabrielle was now very angry. She could not understand how Fielding could act what seemed to her so unfair a part. She could not understand how he could expect her to sanction it or join in it. She felt hurt to think that he could have known so little of her. A man must despise women in his heart, she thought, who could expect them to act like that. If any drop of poison from Paulina's half-spoken hints about the cause of his recent dislike to herself mingled in any way with Gabrielle's feelings then, Gabrielle was not herself conscious of its influence. She was grieved and angered that Fielding should have misunderstood her, and expected her to play an ungenerous part towards the unfortunate Paulina. It came on her mind with a flush of pride in the recollection that it was only the other day she had heard insinuations made against himself and had refused to believe them.

'Well,' Fielding said, 'I suppose there is no use in our talking of this any more, Mrs. Vanthorpe? You asked me for my advice and I gave it to you honestly. You won't take it, and there's an end.'

'I know what you would think of me,' she answered, 'if I were to take such advice in any other affair. We should hear something about the high principles of women then!'

He presently left her. Each was angry with the other. Paulina was doubly, trebly delighted. She had made her game, as she would have put it, to her own entire satisfaction. If she might have ventured on such a performance, it would have greatly delighted her to execute a wild dance of triumph in the very face of the discomfited Fielding. As it was, she could not refrain from flinging at him one saucy look of exultation as he passed out of the room. He saw it, and she meant that he should see it. She would have lost half the joy of her cleverly won success if she could not have thus taken Fielding into her confidence and let him know distinctly that she had been only playing a part and that she considered herself to have won, and therefore was free to mock at his confusion.

That night Robert Charlton and his wife were sitting in their room in Bolingbroke Place rather late. Robert was seized with a fit of hard work, and was toiling away assiduously, and in silence, his head down. Janet was engaged in some sewing. She was very much depressed and out of spirits. She had not seen anything of Mrs. Vanthorpe for many days. Mrs. Bramble, her aunt, had come to see Janet once or twice, and had brought her some scraps of gossip, but they were not, somehow, of a nature to gladden Janet.

Suddenly a knock was heard at the door. Charlton started from his work and stood up like a man who fancies he sees a ghost. His wife started merely on seeing him start.

'Was that a knock, Janet?'

'I think so, dear. It's late; I wonder who it can be.'

'Don't you go,' he said, motioning her back. 'Don't you go.'

He was moving towards the door. The knock was heard once more, and there was a certain impatience in it.

'Do you think it is some woman?' Robert asked.

Why he did not open the door at once or let her open it, his wife could not guess. A voice was heard outside.

'I do declare it's Mr. Fielding!' Janet exclaimed. Her husband drew back.

'Fielding?' he said. 'So it is—you open the door, Janet.'

Janet promptly opened the door.

'Why, Mr. Fielding, I said it was you!'

'Well, Janet, are you glad to see me?'

'Indeed I am.'

For a moment or two Robert kept far back in the room, almost like one who expects to have to stand suddenly on his defence. Then, seeming to take a more satisfactory view of the visit, he came forward to meet Fielding.

'Well, Charlton, here you are as usual working away.'

'We didn't expect to see you, Mr. Fielding.'

'Didn't you really, Mr. Charlton? Why not now, might one ask? A man may occasionally visit his rooms, mayn't he?'

'Yes; but when one has become a grand swell, you know, and lives with one's friends in a great West-end square, one isn't expected to come back very often to a den like this.'

'Piff-puff! I have been back to the den several times lately, only you didn't know anything about it. I come and go, follow my own whim as usual, Charlton. Don't you remember the talk we had one night about the rolling-stone and the mill-stone; I like the den; perhaps it suits me best.'

'We are glad to see you again, Mr. Fielding, at all events,' the meek Janet ventured to say.

'Thank you, Janet, I do believe you are. I don't quite know about your husband; but he is such a surly old bear, one never expects much gladness from him. I say, Charlton, are you well acquainted with the history of Ireland under the reign of Queen Elizabeth?'

'No, I can't say that I am.'

'Because if you were you would know that there was a distinguished Irish chieftain of that time who went by the name of Surly-boy. I should think you must be a descendant of his.'

'Well, there's nothing to make a man particularly lively here. You have more the luck of it, Mr. Fielding.'

'To be sure; yes, your only jig-maker! Well, I have come now to hale you and Janet—Mrs. Robert Charlton, of course I mean—by force of arms, if needs be, down to supper in my little den, just as we had it once before, don't you remember, Janet?'

Yes, Janet remembered very well. That was indeed a pleasant night. The young man's voice sounded sweet and cheery in her ears that had heard scarcely any but repining and melancholy tones for a long time, and Janet had always greatly liked Fielding and his kindly, companionable ways. To-night, however, she looked at him with something of a doubtful

expression. His gaiety of manner did not seem quite like the old thing, somehow ; it appeared to her to be forced and unnatural. Perhaps, she conjectured, he is only doing this to show that he doesn't think any the less of his old friends because he has gone back to his grand family. It was kind of him all the same, she thought.

Robert accepted the invitation, much to his wife's surprise.

'Come, Janet, be quick,' he said ; 'don't keep Mr. Fielding waiting.'

'Keep Mr. Fiddlestick !' said Fielding. 'We need not be so high and mighty in our politeness, need we, Charlton ?'

'We have been hearing such wonderful things about you, Mr. Fielding,' Janet said in her delight, as she was preparing to go downstairs.

'Truly, Janet ? Anything good ? That would be odd news, indeed, wouldn't it ?'

'Oh, yes, delightful news ; all about you and your brother, and how fond he is of you, and how you are always going to live with him, and be always a gentleman ; oh, I beg pardon, I don't mean that,' and Janet blushed.

'Don't mean what, Janet ? Don't mean that I am going to be a gentleman ? Why, now you are hard upon me.'

'Oh, no, no ! I only meant that of course you were always a gentleman ; there's nothing new in that ; money can't alter that.'

'Janet, you chatter too much,' her husband said.

'Not too much for me,' Fielding said. 'It gives me pleasure to hear a friendly voice. Go ahead, Janet, chatter away, if your husband will call it chattering.'

No modest little woman ever yet found her fluency of speech increased on being told by one of two listeners that she chattered too much, and enjoined by the other to chatter away. Janet became silent all at once.

'You've stopped her up,' said Fielding ; 'see what an unlucky fellow you are, Charlton.'

'It was you stopped me up more than Robert, Mr. Fielding,' Janet said in great good humour, 'for you told me to chatter away.'

'Very well ; and why don't you chatter away ?'

'Oh, because I seemed to be only making a fool of myself, and one does not like that.'

'I wish I could make a fool of myself.'

'Why so, Mr. Fielding ?'

'Because that would prove that the thing had not yet been done, Janet ; there would be some comfort in that.'

'Talking of people making fools of themselves,' Robert interrupted, 'is it true what we hear about Mrs. Vanthorpe?'

'What do you hear about her?'

'They say she is going to be married.'

'Oh, I don't believe a word of it,' said Janet. 'It's only some nonsense my aunt has got into her head; I wouldn't repeat such things, Robert.'

'Why not? Where's the harm? Mr. Fielding is sure to know whether it is true or isn't.'

'Why should I be sure to know?' Fielding asked.

'Well, because the story goes that she is to be Lady Fielding—that she is going to marry your brother.'

'Oh, Robert!' Janet protested.

'I know nothing about it,' Fielding said carelessly. 'I am not by any means my brother's keeper; and Mrs. Vanthorpe isn't likely to consult me. Come along; let us have supper, and let who will marry or talk of marriages.'

He drew Janet's arm within his own and swept her down the stairs, leaving Robert to follow at such pace as suited him. Janet looked timorously into his face as they went down. She wished her husband had not talked in such a way; she could not understand why he had done so—it was so unlike Robert to repeat what he was fond of calling women's silly gossip, and he generally professed the poorest opinion of anything said by Janet's aunt, even when it happened to be good sense. But Mr. Fielding did not seem to have paid much attention to Robert's words; at least, he talked and rattled all the way down as if he were in the highest spirits.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SUNSTROKE.

A TRAVELLER in a tropical country goes about for days, or months, and braves the sun and the climate, and suffers nothing; perhaps, if he be of a specially hardy mould, scarcely thinks about such a thing as danger. Suddenly one day he is cleft down by a sunstroke. Why that day more than another? The conditions were the same to all appearance for him all the days before. So many days that could be counted, so many sun-rays that could not be counted, had shone on his unharmed head; and why on this one particular day does this one particular ray cleave him down? Was that sunbeam charged from all eternity

before to do the work, as Madame de Sévigné declares the cannon-ball to have been that struck down the great Turenne?

The question is asked now *à propos* only of so unhistoric and unimportant a person as Clarkson Fielding. He had been out and about the world for many years, young as he still was; he had been his own master almost since he was a boy; he had seen many countries; he was fond* of making acquaintances everywhere; he must have met and known, on a moderate computation, some hundreds of pretty women, and he had never until now felt one real thrill or pang of love. It is unreasonable to suppose that many of these women were not handsomer and cleverer than Gabrielle Vanthorpe; and yet it was the ray from Gabrielle's kindly eyes that gave him his sunstroke. The thing might not have been surprising if he were one who disliked women and kept aloof from them, and was at last drawn, or dragged, into companionship with a woman, and so fell the easier victim. It would not have been surprising if he were one who had a low opinion of women generally, and was at length suddenly forced to see that there was one woman at least deserving of a better judgment. But Fielding had always liked the society of women, so long as they were easy and agreeable. He liked to be on pleasant terms of *camaraderie* with an intelligent woman of any class; and even if she were not particularly intelligent, as in the case of Janet Charlton, he liked her if she were genial and friendly. He was never conscious of having been shy or constrained in the society of women: there never was a time when he could not have looked a girl straight in the face; there never was, until now, a time when his pulse would have quickened by one beat at meeting or parting with a woman, except as it might have quickened at meeting or parting with some man, his friend. Not that he had not had flirtations and what are called love affairs. He was far too curious a student of human nature not to put himself in the way of such experiences; but he had never found his rest much disturbed by them. The moment he saw Gabrielle Vanthorpe he fell in love with her. It did not even take him long to be conscious to the full of what had happened.

He did not by any means like the new sensation. It disturbed him; it was opposed to all his ways; it marred his easy enjoyment of life; it was a new and strange element disarranging the established economy of his irresponsible existence. He had known himself, or had fancied he knew himself, for some time, and had never supposed he could turn into a fond lover. Besides, when the new sensation came, it seemed utterly out of

the question to suppose it could lead to anything more than simple disturbance to himself. He did not even stop for one moment to contemplate the possibility of Gabrielle Vanthorpe falling in love with him, and marrying him. It may as well, indeed, be said that if the possibility had occurred to his mind at the earlier stages of their acquaintance, it would have brought him little comfort. He did not want to be married; he did not think he was by any means the sort of person to undertake the responsibility of a married life. It seemed to him as much out of keeping with all his schemes and ideas of existence, as to be governor of the Bank of England, or Chancellor of the Exchequer. How was a man to know, he had sometimes thought in other days, whether he would like to be married or not? A woman might be very good company for an hour or two—but every day and for ever? He rather sympathised with the American lady who declined to get married on the ground that she couldn't have a man always dangling at her heels. He did not feel the least anxiety to have a woman always dangling at his heels. It would be intolerable when the thing was done to know that it could not be undone, and had to be tolerated.

Therefore, when Fielding became conscious of the new sensation, he chafed against it vehemently. He tried hard to shake himself loose of it; perhaps we may say to laugh himself out of it. He tried not to believe in it. For a while he really did not, or would not, believe in it. Death is a thing for others, not for us—that we all know. The strange new pain that would seem to us significant beyond misapprehension for another, cannot be death for us—oh, no, it is impossible; it is this, it is that, it cannot be death. So it was at first with Fielding and his new sensation. It could not be love: absurd, impossible. But after a little there was no mistaking the thing; and Fielding looked the reality fairly in the face, and saw that his time too had come, and that the whole conditions of his life had changed. Not poppy, nor mandragora, could ever steep his senses in such forgetfulness that the time to come should be as the time that was now gone for ever.

Perhaps the worst of it was that the past life seemed now as barren in his eyes as the future. It seemed far worse: it seemed odious as well as barren. He hated the recollection of the experiences he had gone through; the pitiful amusements, the ignoble companionships, the worthless enterprises, the rapid love of change, the selfish pursuit of pleasures and whims—and oh, such tasteless pleasures, such paltry whims! His brother

now seemed to him a thousand times superior, for all his oddities and his nonsense. Wilberforce had some purposes of practical good, at least. He bustled and fussed and busied himself about schemes which, if they came to anything, would do good to somebody. Nobody on earth would be the better for his, Clarkson Fielding's, having lived; or need care twopence if he were dead.

It is perhaps needless to say that some, at least, of Fielding's respect for the schemes of Sir Wilberforce came from his observation of the respect with which Gabrielle Vanthorpe listened to them. Gabrielle, as we know, held nothing alien from her which in the slightest degree concerned the good, or even the comfort, of a man and a brother; and she had always listened with an interest, the more flattering because it was genuine, to Sir Wilberforce's expositions of the good he was about to confer on civilised mankind, by his various applications of practical science to the improvement of the conditions of every-day life. Fielding began to grow more and more full of regard for Wilberforce. In proportion to the strength of his old reluctance to come near his brother was now the revulsion of feeling towards him. Through half his life Fielding had made up his mind that his elder brother disliked him, and was glad to be rid of him, and would be sorry to see him again; and now that he found Wilberforce so simple, so straightforward, so affectionate in his peculiar way, the heart of the younger man went out towards him with a remorseful tenderness. No one could have obliged Fielding more than by trying to injure Sir Wilberforce, and giving him, Fielding, a chance of getting at the wrong-doer. He felt as if he ought to be taking care of Wilberforce, who was so much his senior; for there was something unspeakably boyish, not to say childlike, in Wilberforce's oddities and fads, and unnecessary unresting activity.

'Tell you what, Clarkson,' the elder said one day as they were leaving Gabrielle Vanthorpe, 'that's one of the nicest women I know. You don't think so, no? why not, Clarkson? why not?'

'I didn't say she wasn't one of the nicest women I knew,' Fielding said; 'I think she is the best woman I ever saw, and the most beautiful too, and the cleverest, and the sweetest, and the dearest—and anything else you like, Wilberforce. I'm open to a competition to see who can say the most in her praise, like two of the shepherds in Virgil singing the praises of some idyllic girl.'

'No, I don't think I'll venture to compete, Clarkson—you had always more of the literary turn than I, my boy; and I never could care anything about these things of Virgil; stupidest

things in the world they seem to me : I suppose you do really like them, since you say you do ; but I give you my word, I never could see anything in them but silly stuff, don't you know ?'

'What do they prove, after all ?' Clarkson asked ironically, thinking of Newton and 'Paradise Lost.'

'Exactly,' Wilberforce said very contentedly ; 'there it is ; what do they prove ? why, look here, Clarkson, these Romans, do you know, with their poets, and their Tityruses, and Amarylises, and all that lot, they hadn't a chimney to their houses. Call that greatness ? I don't.'

'Well, if I don't agree with you in all that, I do agree with you about Mrs. Vanthorpe, Wilberforce ; I think her a charming woman, and a woman with a character and a heart.'

'Glad to hear you say so, Clarkson ; you have seen the world and cities and all that, like who is it—Ulysses or somebody—and you ought to be a judge of character. A man might do worse than marry Mrs. Vanthorpe ; eh, Clarkson, don't you think so ?'

Fielding was surprised at this remark, and looked into his brother's face. Wilberforce was quite unmoved.

'Tell you what, Clarkson, I wish she would marry me ; I do indeed. I am not much of a marrying man ; but I suppose a man will be expected to marry some time or other. It's a sort of social duty one owes, I take it ; people will look for it ; and I think it is about time for me to be making up my mind. I am not like you with all the world before me ; I'm getting on, you know. I have been thinking of this a good deal lately ; ever since I came to know her.'

Fielding murmured out something about its being very natural and very proper, and doing equal honour to the head and heart of somebody ; he did not exactly explain whom he meant. He was indeed much bewildered.

'She's the nicest woman I ever knew,' Sir Wilberforce went on ; 'much the nicest. She has no stuff and nonsense about her ; and she takes an interest in things ; I never knew so young a woman take such an interest in things. She would make a capital wife. A deuced deal younger than I am, of course ; but I don't think that is a matter of any consequence ; and then, having been left a widow all at once, you know, there's a kind of gravity about her, so that one doesn't think of her exactly as if she were a mere girl, you know ; and there wouldn't appear all the discrepancy that there is.'

Fielding had indeed often noticed that the peculiar conditions

of her life had given a sort of sweet gravity to Gabrielle's manner that made her seem less young, less like a girl, than she really was. Still, the idea of a marriage between her and Sir Wilberforce seemed to him something preposterous.

'Of course, this is all between ourselves, Clarkson; I have only been thinking of it in a vague sort of way, you know; I wouldn't mention it to anyone but you for all the world. I don't know, of course, whether she would have me. I am not the sort of fellow a handsome young woman would be likely to fall in love with; I know that pretty well, not being quite a fool, Clarkson. But then I could offer her a good position, you know, and money enough; and I fancy I shouldn't make half a bad husband; and a woman might do worse, mightn't she, Clarkson? eh, eh? don't you think so?'

Clarkson really did think so. He thought a woman might do a great deal worse than marry his honest, kindly, fussy brother; and he said as much with emphasis.

'Thank you, Clarkson; thank you very much; I know you mean what you say.—Well, we'll think it over. You know, when one has gone to all this trouble, and has had all these houses arranged as perfectly as the practical science of the day can make them, one is bound, I suppose, to put a woman over them, isn't he? people will expect it; people will expect it. Don't you think so?'

The conversation threw Fielding into a contemplative mood. That was one of the nights when he first went back to his old lodgings in Bolingbroke Place. He found his way into his den unseen and unnoticed by the Charltons, or anyone, and he began, almost without thinking of it, to put a few things together, as a man does who is preparing for a journey. Would she marry Wilberforce? he kept asking himself. Why not? There could hardly be a better fellow; and it would be absurd to suppose that any woman in Gabrielle's position could be wholly indifferent to the attractions of a title and great wealth. And what if she did marry Wilberforce? why should he, Fielding, feel in any way astonished, or shocked, or grieved? He had not thought of the possibility of her marrying anyone, but was it at all likely she would remain, or be allowed to remain, in mere unmeaning widowhood all her life? She was only a girl yet; why should she not marry?

Exactly; why should she not? Yet the thought of such a thing seemed to make Fielding weary of the sun; seemed to make the stars lose their fire. His impulse was to go away; go away at once, and never come back. With all his joyous temperament, his general good spirits, and his indomitable ease

and familiarity of manner to all comers, he had a great deal of nervousness and sensitiveness in his composition, and was liable to intervals of profound depression. There is a preposterous Englishman in a once famous French novel, of whom it is told that his mother always called him 'poor sensitive;' such was the tender and delicate melancholy of his insular nature; he was, if we are not mistaken, a Lancashireman. Now, Fielding's young mother, while greatly amused at this French idea of a typical Lancashireman—a class of person towards whom she felt but slight attraction—was yet pleased to discern in her boy, even at his thoughtless years, something of that sensitive nature, so rare among Englishmen, and she loved to call him 'poor sensitive.' Some of her friends laughed at her, seeing how healthy, strong, and fearless the boy was growing up, seeing that there never was a dog, however uncouth or savage, that he could not play with at first sight; not a colt he could not ride; no man or woman he could not question and get into talk with. But the mother knew something about the true nature of her boy, for all that. She had had the benefit of all his little confidences; she had known how he would creep into her arms and cry because of supposed slights that no one but she ever thought he had felt; because of pathetic scenes or suggestions that no one but she could ever have fancied likely to touch him. She had known how some music affected him; and some lines of poetry. She had known him to be so much affected by a little poem he once found in a country newspaper that she had to steal it away from him, to keep him from reading it again and again, and always with tears, although the poem did not contain a single allusion to the stock subjects of the pathetic by which children are commonly affected. The lines were from some collection of poems with which she was not acquainted, and no name was attached to them in the newspaper; but Fielding found out years and years after that they were by William Blake. His mother was not so far wrong when she called him 'poor sensitive,' half in jest, half in earnest, after the man in the 'Juif Errant.' It was this very sensitiveness which nobody but his mother saw in him that drove him away from his father's house in resentment of fancied slights, in anticipation of injustice that he now saw would never have been done.

Yet he rallied again after the talk with Wilberforce, and schooled himself into a saner mood, and he went back to his brother's house, and visited Gabrielle again, as we have seen, and resolved to think no more of the matter. But he was greatly hurt at first by Gabrielle's manner to him the morning when she bade

him defiance in defence of the beautiful Paulina; and he went back to his den that night, and tried a joyous supper with the Charltons, and made up his mind that he must leave England at once. It was not any better with him when, thinking over all that had passed, he began to see that Gabrielle had been very much in the right, and had shown, even in her unwisdom and her quixotry, just that chivalrous spirit which he so much admired in her. The more foolish her conduct appeared in a worldly sense, the more generous, the more truly like herself it showed to him. He began to think how very like she was to the kind of ideal character which, in his days of fanciful boyhood, he used to set out as the model on which to mould himself. He began to be sentimental and egotistic then and there, and to declare that she was like his better self—that Providence had sent her to be a better self to him; and that only perverse chance, and the world, and the devil, could have come between him and her. But this highflown mood soon sank, fell into the marsh of reality. ‘She doesn’t care for me; not one straw,’ he told himself; ‘I know that well enough: why should she? how could she? I have never done anything such a woman could care about. Wilberforce is a thousand times a better fellow in every sense. I wish she had never brought us together—such a good fellow as he is; and now the moment I have found him, I must lose him again. I wish I had never seen her. I was happy before I saw her—oh, no, I was not. I can only be happy by remembering her. What an ass I am!’

This was the only conclusion at all satisfactory at which he could arrive. There are two famous mortals whom sportive sorcery translates into the likeness of the ass. One is Bully Bottom; the other, and much older, is the hero of Apuleius. Bottom did not know of his ass’s head; his elder brother in misfortune was only too conscious of the change that had been wrought in him. Some thought of this was whimsically passing through the brain of Fielding. ‘At least,’ he said, ‘I am like the fellow in Apuleius; if I am an ass, I know it.’

CHAPTER XX.

SIR WILBERFORCE’S INTERVENTION.

WHEN the excitement of her discussion with Fielding was over, and she had formally proclaimed herself the protectress of Paulina against the world, Gabrielle began to feel a little dispirited and blank. She was convinced that she had been in

the right, and that she could not have acted otherwise; but she was sorry to have had to act in any way that might offend Fielding. She became more and more sorry for it as, during the course of the next day or two, Paulina kept insinuating explanations of Fielding's dislike of her in a manner which was not clear enough to challenge any comment, and which Gabrielle felt she had better decline to encourage by any manner of notice. She felt herself more inclined every hour to shrink from close contact with Paulina. The house seemed to have been made unwholesome by the strange woman's presence. Gabrielle lay awake at nights thinking with a strong sense of repugnance that Paulina was sleeping not very far off.

Fielding she did not expect to see soon again. She could not even desire to see him as long as Paulina remained in the house. It was a great sacrifice, she thought, to have displeased him for the sake of Paulina. Yet she could not bring herself to believe that it was any part of her duty to accept unproved accusations against this poor outcast of respectability, or to turn Paulina out of doors as a sacrifice to the proprieties and the conventionalities of the world. But like all women, even the strongest and bravest, she felt it a terrible trial to have to stand up alone against the opinions of her little world. She could not but remember too that, of all men she had ever met, Fielding seemed the least likely to be governed by any servile regard for the mere conventionalities of society.

It was a great relief to her when one morning she saw Sir Wilberforce ride up to her gate. He looked so stout and strong, so healthy and rosy, as he checked his horse and was preparing to dismount, that his very presence seemed an antidote against morbid thoughts and fearsome misgivings. She remembered at that moment a saying of Lady Honeybell's—'Eh, my dear, your woman's-rights theory and your woman's independence are all very well for fair weather; but when anything is going wrong, it's a great comfort to have a man in the house to advise with.' Sir Wilberforce seemed to be just the sort of man a woman would like to have in the house under any untoward circumstances requiring firm counsel. Gabrielle found herself almost admiring him as she saw him get off his horse; and she went promptly to her drawing-room to welcome him. If he had been at all a vain man, he might, with such purposes as he had communicated to his brother, have drawn cheering auguries from the evident pleasure with which Gabrielle received him.

'Mrs. Vanthorpe, can you tell me what has become of my brother Clarkson? he hasn't turned up now for two days.'

that sort of thing ; I've been a magistrate since before you were born, I dare say. Where is she ? I'll go to her.'

'I will ask her to come, if you wish——'

'No, no, my dear lady ; you mustn't be present, if you please. I should much rather talk to her myself. Tell your servant to show me to where she is. I'll soon get to know all about the whole affair.'

Sir Wilberforce was evidently about to enter on a formal examination of Paulina, after the regular fashion of a county justice of the peace interrogating some new tramp or alien beggar who has ventured within his jurisdiction.

Gabrielle could not repress a smile.

'But I don't think she would like to be taken in that way, Sir Wilberforce. It is very kind of you to try to relieve me of some trouble ; but would it be fair to my brother's widow to treat her as if she were a person of suspicious character ? She is here as a guest and not as a prisoner.'

Sir Wilberforce shook his head and sat down again.

'Where do you keep your property ?' he asked—'jewels and things—plate and things ? plate at the bank ?'

'Everything of that kind that I have is in this house—not much, Sir Wilberforce,' said Gabrielle, smiling and likewise blushing. His good-humoured, *brusque*, dictatorial way was not to be resisted, even although Gabrielle began to think that he was looking on her as a fool.

'Never do, never do,' Sir Wilberforce went on. 'Ridiculous to have a place like this with only women. Coachman, even—does he sleep on the premises ?'

'Mr. Bramble does ; he is my housekeeper's husband, Sir Wilberforce.'

'That old man I saw the other day ? Well, he would not be much good, I fancy.'

'But, Sir Wilberforce, really it isn't a case of standing siege. The house isn't going to be attacked by the forty thieves—and even if it were, I don't see how poor Paulina's being here would be likely to make things any the worse. She's not in league with the captain of the band. This house is not a grange.'

'Not, a what ?' Sir Wilberforce asked. He was not strong on Shakespeare.

'Well, I mean it isn't like a lonely country house. Besides, this poor Paulina—what on earth is there about her that makes you all go wild with suspicion ? you are as bad as her brother.'

'You don't know much about this sort of people ; and you

are so awfully good-natured, you know. Well, do you think I mayn't see this person and talk with her a little ?'

'I shouldn't like to have her shown off like a wild animal, Sir Wilberforce ; or to have her treated as if she were a prisoner. Do please to understand that she is my sister-in-law, who has been guilty of no greater crime, so far as I know, than that of coming to ask me to help her in making herself known to her husband's mother.'

'Well, look here; the best thing you can do is to comply with her wish at once. Turn her over on Major Leven and his wife ; they will understand how to deal with her much better than you can. Tell you what, Mrs. Vanthorpe : if you will allow me, I will call on Major Leven at once. I'll go over there now, and tell him all about the whole affair, and let him come and see this woman. It really is his business much more than yours, don't you know ?'

Gabrielle could not dispute this fact. Sir Wilberforce's offer relieved her of a difficulty. She was really growing much distressed by the presence of Paulina. There was no talk of Paulina's returning to her lodgings, or sending for her child. When Gabrielle asked her about the boy she only evaded any answer, or laughed and assured her the boy was all right, and that he was to be brought over to her the very next day, and that he should stay there if Gabrielle liked him. But the boy did not make his appearance all the same, and Gabrielle could not but remember Fielding's urgent advice to her to press for some information about the child. In other ways too the companionship of Paulina became distressing. She talked with the maids a great deal, and asked them a variety of questions and made odd jokes with them. She rang her bell incessantly, and sometimes apparently for no other purpose than to have a chat with any of the servants ; unless, indeed, when she wanted a little dry sherry or some soda-water with a dash of brandy. She scowled so fiercely at Miss Elvin more than once that that young lady declared herself in bodily fear of Paulina, and protested that Paulina would certainly murder someone before she left the house. Gabrielle despised these terrors, and was determined that she would not be frightened out of sheltering Paulina as long as nothing worse than lack of polite manners could be ascribed to her ; but in the mean time her presence seemed to vulgarise the very atmosphere. It was a great relief, therefore, to Gabrielle when Sir Wilberforce took on himself the task of calling on Major Leven, and directing his attention to Paulina. Gabrielle liked Sir Wilberforce so much, and

thought him so kind and fatherly, that she did not mind in the least making use of his volunteered intervention. Nothing could be more remarkable than the manner in which she seemed to have struck up a friendship with him. They might have been uncle and niece, she thought, so free and friendly and trusting they were. She might have been his ward and he her guardian. Truly it is to be observed that Gabrielle had rather a rapid way of striking up friendships and of making confidants; and perhaps if Sir Wilberforce had known how quickly her likings were formed, he would have felt less gratified by her manifest liking for him. The liking was manifest, however, and he rode away very cheery and delighted to do her a service. He sang in imagination a sort of 'Tirra-Lirra,' like a middle-aged Lancelot of the more than middle-aged nineteenth century, as he went on his way to Major Leven. It must be owned that Gabrielle did actually cast a glance from one of her windows after him as he trotted off, looking firm and healthful and magisterial, with his sleek groom behind him—just the very model, to all outward seeming, of the man a young woman in perplexity would rely on for comfort and aid.

'Absurd to have her living all alone in that sort of way,' the stout Sir Lancelot said to himself as he rode on. 'Never do, never do.' Then his spirits began to sing 'Tirra-Lirra' again.

CHAPTER XXI.

EXORCISED.

WHY had Clarkson Fielding been so unwise as to argue and endeavour to convince Gabrielle? He should not have discussed the question of Paulina's treatment: he should have done something forthwith, and confronted Gabrielle with accomplished realities. For all that experience of men and cities on which Sir Wilberforce had complimented him, he had not anything like the knowledge of how to deal with women which came instinctively to his home-keeping brother's homely wits. Sir Wilberforce made up his mind at once that it would 'never do' to have Paulina saddled on Gabrielle; that when Clarkson spoke against the woman there must be matter in it; and he decided that she must be got out of the house directly.

The end proved to be very easily brought about. Paulina's little plot was soon exploded. As she would probably have put it herself, 'the game was up' in a moment. A very brief in-

investigation conducted by Major Leven, at the instigation and with the companionship of Sir Wilberforce, and with the help of Scotland Yard, turned far too much light on the immediate plans of Philip Vanthorpe's widow. To begin with, her one child had died before she came to Europe, and she had been in active negotiation, with the help of the woman in whose house she lodged on the Surrey side, to supply his place with a hired darling, in order to establish an irresistible claim on Mrs. Leven and the family generally. That was enough. Into her past life there was no need to enquire closely. Sir Wilberforce prudently suggested that the less anyone now knew about it the better. It was arranged, however, that she should be offered a small yearly sum, provided she took herself away from London and did not notoriously misconduct herself. But to this proposal the high-souled Paulina replied by snapping her fingers in the face of Major Leven who made it, and informing him that she was not to be kept quiet on such terms as that. She now boldly assumed the responsibility of her little plot: to adopt her own expression, she 'faced the music.' She avowed that, as her child was dead, she meant to have hired another one, 'to gammon the old lady,' and she laughed boisterously at the severe language which Major Leven began to use in reprobation of her conduct.

'Keep your twopenny-halfpenny allowance'—such were her irreverent words—'I'll have the pleasure of making your lives miserable for it. Look out for me, Major; tell the old lady she'll hear from me once or twice before all's done. Tell her she hasn't heard the last of Paulina Vanthorpe, not by a long way.'

'There are laws in this land, Madame,' Major Leven said with dignity.

'So there are, old boy, and mother-in-laws too,' the undaunted Paulina replied, 'and I mean to go for one of them one of these days.'

'I presume I need not say that you are to leave Mrs. Vanthorpe's house?' Major Leven said.

'Mrs. Vanthorpe hasn't a house to leave.'

'This house,' Major Leven said with emphasis.

'This house ain't Mrs. Vanthorpe's; Mrs. Vanthorpe's rich relations are turning her out of house and home; she may go and lie in the streets for all they care; I am Mrs. Vanthorpe.'

Major Leven winced, but he could not dispute the accuracy of her statement.

'I mean Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe,' he said.

'You ought to say what you mean,' was Paulina's comment.

'You will leave this house, of course?'

'I'll settle all that with my sister-in-law Gabrielle,' Paulina replied grandly. 'She's the only Christian in the lot.'

Even Major Leven was displeased with Gabrielle. He could not but think that she had in some way brought this dreadful woman on them all, and made them ridiculous and exposed them to an almost unlimited possibility of shame and scandal. Gabrielle did not venture to ask him what Mrs. Leven said about the whole affair. In truth, Mrs. Leven had not said much. She resolutely declined from first to last to see Paulina, or to have anything whatever to do with her, beyond making the offer of the annual grant which Paulina had so contemptuously spurned. Her words about Gabrielle were few and harsh. 'Will you ask that mad girl,' she said to Major Leven, 'to cease once for all from trying to bring further disgrace on the family of her dead husband?' Major Leven did not bear this message to Gabrielle. He did not say that, whenever his wife spoke of her now, she only called her 'that mad girl.' But he did remonstrate with Gabrielle firmly and somewhat sadly on her impulsiveness; and she felt his words keenly. Major Leven saw dreadful things looming in the future. He wished very much Paulina had taken the money: he wished they had offered her more at first. He felt sure she would be as good as her word, and would try to inflict all manner of annoyance upon them. He even feared she would not leave Gabrielle's house. He spoke of his fear to Gabrielle.

'Hadn't I better do something, Gabrielle? She can be got out of the house, you know, if she won't go quietly. But I don't see how you are to manage with her. You are far too soft. She will easily talk you over. Hadn't I better take some steps?'

'Thank you, no,' Gabrielle said quietly. 'If I have brought this on myself, I can get out of it myself. I don't believe the poor creature is so bad as you all appear to think. I am not in the least afraid of her. I have more faith in human nature than even you, Major Leven, although you used to teach me once that above all things one must not lose faith in the better part of human nature.'

'Yes, my dear, yes,' Major Leven said, a little softened; 'but that was in dealing with untutored aboriginal races, you know, and not in the case of creatures spoiled by the neglect of society—having all the viciousness of our effete civilisation

grafted on to the wild passions of the savage.' Major Leven was gliding insensibly into the eloquence of St. James's Hall.

'Well, you must leave me to deal with my aboriginals in my own way, Major Leven. You need not be alarmed for me. I shall go into the lioness's cage, without any fear, and come out all right. I believe I could have dealt with this poor woman better than any of you—at all events for what remains I mean to try.'

There was no coping with the mad girl in one of these humours. Major Leven left her, not without pity and regret. 'At all events old Bramble is in the house,' he said to himself, 'a hale old fellow, and there are several women; I don't see how any harm can come to the girl.' He remained more than an hour near the house, however, and when he was going away he took a policeman into his confidence, and bound him to keep a special look-out over Gabrielle's little demesne.

Meanwhile Gabrielle had entered the cage of the lioness. She went to Paulina's room at once. She did not knock at the door, fearing that Paulina might lock herself in and refuse to see her, but boldly opened the door and went in. At first she was a little startled. Paulina lay upon the hearth, her face downward, writhing like one in passion or in pain, and beating the floor with her hands. Gabrielle never wanted more than a second of thought to regain her courage. She stooped down and touched the woman's shoulder. Paulina leaped to her feet with a spring which might indeed have almost reminded one of the leap of the lioness. She confronted Gabrielle with glaring eyes and passion-distorted features. Her half-bare arms appeared to have the muscles and strength of an amazon. At the sight of Gabrielle, however, her expression became less fierce, and she muttered something about having been sleeping, and tried to pull herself into more seemly condition.

'Paulina,' Gabrielle said in her quiet, sweet tone, 'I am sorry for all this, very sorry. You ought not to have deceived me about the child. I was your friend.'

'There, there!'. Paulina said vehemently; 'don't say any more about it. I know I did wrong. I don't care a—— I mean, I don't care a button about *them*; but I do care about you. If I had known you longer, I'd have let you into the secret; I'd never have tried to deceive you.'

It was not clear whether Paulina meant that, if she had known Gabrielle better, she would have shown her appreciation of Gabrielle's sense of honour by taking her into the plot about the child. It is possible this may have been her meaning.

Paulina only answered by a half-impatient gesture, as of one who would ask, 'What is the good of going over all that now?' Gabrielle felt that there was indeed no good in going over it. Paulina was not in the slightest degree penitent for what she had done, except alone for not having 'played the square game,' as she would have called it, with so good a creature as Mrs. Albert Vanthorpé.

Gabrielle left her. A few moments after, it happened that Miss Elvin was passing along one of the corridors and she met Paulina. Perhaps the singer expressed some pity or scorn in her eyes, or drew her skirts a little too ostentatiously around her to let the outcast of respectability go by. Anyhow, Paulina suddenly stopped and seized Miss Elvin by her two thin sallow wrists, and shook her until Paulina's own bangles rattled like cymbals in the affrighted captive's ears.

'Do you know that I could lift you up in one hand, and chuck you over these balusters?' Paulina asked, and she fixed her fierce eyes on Miss Elvin's feeble struggles and shivers. 'Do you know that I could strangle you, or snap you in two across my knee? There, get away with you, and put on a civil face when next you meet me.'

Poor Miss Elvin vanished in mere hysterics.

That night Gabrielle sat in her room alone. She had sent her maid to bed, but she had as yet no notion of going to bed herself. Her window was open to the skies, like that of Irene with her destinies of whom Edgar Poe sings. The soft night air came with benign coolness and freshness across the trees of the park. The murmur of London was subdued to a low rushing sound, as that of some far-distant waterfall. There was no moon, but the stars were very bright, and appeared to be in movement of unwonted energy through the still heaven. Gabrielle seemed as if by looking up to the sky, and abstracting herself from the sight of the trees and the walls, she could actually feel the motion of the earth through space. She had some need to abstract herself from realities and to indulge in fancies; for there had of late been many disagreeable influences affecting her life, and the conditions of her existence had been disturbed by more than one unwelcome and uncongenial intrusion. She was glad in one sense that Paulina was to go; and yet she felt some pity still for the woman, and she was sorry that it was from her house Paulina had to be, as it were, thrust forth. She was beginning to have a disheartening and tormenting doubt as to the virtue of acting always on generous impulses. She was having it forced upon her that the efforts

she loved to make for people's good were for the most part ending in miserable failure. She had not brought happiness, it would seem, but misery to the Charltons. She had done no good for poor Paulina; she had embittered Mrs. Leven against herself more than ever. She seemed to have offended and estranged Clarkson Fielding: she was beginning to have grave doubts concerning the gratitude and the truthfulness of Gertrude Elvin. She feared that she had been too friendly with Walter Tuxal; she began to find out that he was not a man to be treated as if he were of like age with Sir Wilberforce Fielding. In short, her mind was a good deal perturbed with doubts of herself, and of the success of the good purposes to which a little while ago she fondly believed she was devoting her existence, and thereby rendering it justifiable.

Suddenly she heard a rapid succession of little knocks at her door, and before she could rise the handle was turned from the outside, and Miss Elvin came in with all the manner of one who had been considerably scared.

'Oh, I am so glad you are not in bed,' the child of song exclaimed, her eyes almost starting from her head; 'I thought I would come and see you, if you were up. I am so frightened.'

She did look scared certainly, but she had not forgotten to make herself as picturesque as possible even in her alarm. She was only half-dressed; but was in a very artistic condition of undress, with her hair all floating on her back and shoulders—just such *déshabillé* as the most prudent heroine of romance might not object to be found in if the flames were breaking out and the lover were expected every moment to burst into the imperilled damsel's chamber and bear her away to safety.

'What is the matter, Gertrude?' Gabrielle took the girl's hand and led her gently into the room. Gabrielle was not easily put in personal fear, and she assumed that this would be only a question of robbers, or of a mouse, or perhaps even a blackbeetle. She knew that Miss Elvin was of the highly wrought temperament that lives in exaggeration.

'That woman, that dreadful woman! I am so much afraid of her. I am sure she means to kill me!'

'Do you mean poor Paulina?' Gabrielle asked, not altogether without a tone of contempt in her voice.

'I do, I do; she hates me; there is something deadly about her; she will try to kill me, I know. Oh, how I wish I had gone to Lady Honeybell's yesterday!'

'Sit down, Gertrude, and tell me what you are afraid of.'

'Mayn't I lock the door first?'

'No, that would be rather ridiculous, wouldn't it? as if we were two frightened children.'

'But I am so frightened—oh!' The girl looked over her shoulder towards the doorway as if she expected some grisly apparition to cross the threshold.

Gabrielle went to the door, opened it, and looked out along the corridor. There was no one there. All seemed quiet. She came back and sat down by the singer.

'Come, Gertrude, tell me all about it.'

'That woman hates me,' Miss Elvin began; 'that you know—you must have seen it, and she is a dreadful woman.'

'Well, but to-night?'

'I was in my room, not very long ago, and I was undressing, and I had made the lamp very low; I don't like light; and it was very low, like twilight. And suddenly I heard the door open softly, softly, behind me, and that woman crept into the room.'

'Paulina—came into your room?'

'She did; I saw her. She came in and looked round, and her face was all black with rage and hate, and her eyes were like the eyes of a tiger, or a devil, or something, and she made towards the bed, and I know if I had been asleep she would have killed me! Oh, yes, Mrs. Vanthorpe, you may wonder, but I know she would. And then she saw me—Oh!'

'She saw you? Did she say anything?'

'Not a word; but she glared at me with the expression of a demon, and I didn't dare to stir; I thought she was going to kill me. I couldn't move, dear Mrs. Vanthorpe; no, not to save my life. I seemed to be paralysed, as one is in a nightmare, you know. I seemed to be in some horrible dream.'

'I think you must have been in a dream, Gertrude; the light was low, and it was late, and you fell asleep and dreamed this.'

'Oh, no, Mrs. Vanthorpe. Oh, how could that be? I had my hair down, I was brushing my hair, the brush never fell from my hand. Oh, I hadn't a thought of sleep. If I had been asleep she would have killed me.'

'But why should she want to kill you? Did she say anything? What did she do when you looked up? Did she see you?'

'Oh yes, her eyes met mine. She glared into my eyes.'

'And said nothing all this time?'

'Not a word. It wasn't a long time, though it seemed to me as if ages must have rolled by in that moment—ages.'

'Yes, yes, of course; we know all that,' Gabrielle said a little impatiently; 'but did nothing come of this? Did she stand looking at you, and you sit looking at her, and neither speak one word to the other?'

'I didn't dare to speak a word to her, I didn't dare to say a word, I hadn't the power. When she saw that I was up and dressed, and that she couldn't kill me in my sleep, she gave a laugh—Oh, dear Mrs. Vanthorpe, such a laugh! If you ever heard a devil laugh——'

'But I never did, Gertrude; so the comparison isn't of any use to me. Anyhow, she laughed?'

'She did—such a laugh! I know it was like a devil's laugh. A low fiendish chuckle—oh, I shall never have it out of my ears or out of my mind.'

'Oh, yes,' said Gabrielle quietly, 'I have no doubt you will; but I dare say it was a disagreeable laugh. I should not like a woman coming into my bedroom late at night to perform a laugh there. What happened then?'

'Then—oh, then she went out of the room and closed the door behind her.'

'Then, is that all?'

'All! dear Mrs. Vanthorpe, is not that enough? I know you are ever so brave, and I am not; but still, if that woman had suddenly come into your room late at night and glared on you in that way, you would have been frightened too.'

'Well, I dare say I should have thought it very odd conduct. But then she is an odd person. She has not been long in the house, and she may have mistaken your room for hers.'

Miss Elvin shook her head.

'Her room is at the other side of the house.'

'Yes, but the house isn't very large, and she might easily have made a mistake. Perhaps she wanted to ask you for something.'

'But why did she come creeping in that way towards the bed? Why didn't she speak when she saw me?'

'Perhaps she saw by your manner that you were alarmed and she thought she had better go away as fast as possible. Just tell me, Gertrude—I think she must have merely mistaken the room—was she dressed?'

'Oh yes, she was dressed for the street, dressed for walking; she had her hat on.'

'Come now, Gertrude, I really think you must have fallen asleep and dreamed this. Why should the poor woman be dressed for walking out at midnight?'

'I don't know what she was dressed for, or why she was there; but I know she was dressed. I saw her beastly eyes glaring at me under her beastly hat.'

Gabrielle thought the whole thing very unpleasant. No one could well say what odd prank Paulina might have taken it into her head to play off for the purpose of annoying Miss Elvin, or anybody else; and Gabrielle had certainly more than once seen her cast glances of dislike and disgust at Miss Elvin. She was perhaps the sort of malign creature who would take a pleasure in terrifying anyone who showed a capacity for being frightened.

'I think I had better go and speak to her, Gertrude.'

'Go near that dreadful woman, dear Mrs. Vanthorpe?—oh, no, pray don't do that.'

'I am not afraid,' said Gabrielle quietly.

'Won't you call any of the servants?'

'No, I don't want to make any alarm or to have things talked about.'

'Then I must go with you; I dare not stay by myself while you are away.'

'I should rather go alone, Gertrude; I can deal with her much better by myself. There can be no danger to you while you stay here; I shall intercept the danger, you know, whatever it is.'

Gabrielle took a lamp and went to Paulina's room, not perhaps without a little heart-beating at the prospect of a scene rather than of any danger. But there was no scene. Paulina was not in her room, nor in any room. One of the sitting-rooms had windows that were almost level to the little lawn; and Paulina had evidently contrived to open one of these, had gone out, and closed it behind her. The little outer gate presented no obstacle to the elastic limbs of the resolute Paulina. She was gone. Why she had looked into Miss Elvin's room—whether by mere mistake, or with some sudden purpose to do the girl mischief, or out of a freak to frighten her, or whether she took it for Gabrielle's room and meant to have a last look at her patroness, could not now be known. The certain thing was that she had gone and had left no word of message behind her. A sort of message she had left, however. On the table in the room Paulina had occupied, Gabrielle found conspicuously set out the money she had put in the purse which she offered to the outcast. Gabrielle had put a certain sum into it; and there it was now untouched, every sovereign. But the purse was taken—an old thing that had cost a few shillings when it

was new. Paulina had left the place no richer than she entered it, except for the value of an empty purse that had belonged to Gabrielle. Gabrielle understood what was meant by the money left behind and the purse taken.

CHAPTER XXII.

GABRIELLE FLIES TO SANCTUARY.

WILD indeed were the rumours that went about among those who knew Gabrielle when the story of Paulina's visit and her sudden mysterious disappearance became known. The tale swelled in growing until, with some people, it became magnified into a terrible narrative about an attempt on the life of Gabrielle, or of Miss Elvin, or of both together, by a furious assailant who was represented by some as an escaped madwoman, and by others as a professional murderess; a sort of demoniac 'Roaring Girl' without any quality of goodness. The news reached the Charltons soon, but reached them free of all the more extravagant additions. They learned at least that Gabrielle was alive and well, and that nobody had even offered to do her harm. But Robert turned pale, and could not hide, even from the unsuspicious eyes of his wife, the alarm which he felt when he was told that the terrible Paulina had disappeared and was at large. He had but a very vague idea of how her schemes had come to failure, but he had a ghastly suspicion that she would blame him somehow, and that he had not heard the last of her. The late Emperor Napoleon was haunted, people used to say, by a hideous conviction that all the Orsini bombs were not fired away in the attempt of the rue Lepelletier, but that some were saving up in unknown and desperate hands for a new conspiracy. Something of the same sort of alarm was felt by humble Robert Charlton when he found that Paulina had missed her aim and was at large. He had been forced to go and see her in the Surrey house more than once, unknown to his wife, while the plot was maturing; he did not know whether she might not seek to make him now responsible for its failure. Janet saw that he was distressed by something, but did not dare to ask him for an explanation. She resolved that she would take the first opportunity of appealing to Gabrielle for advice and comfort.

The news of Paulina's escape reached Walter Taxal among all the rest. It was told to him at Major Leven's. It was set off by many bitter comments from Mrs. Leven on the general

misdoings of the mad girl. Walter Taxal listened with uncomfortable sensations, then undertook a defence of Gabrielle, who seemed to him to have simply acted for the best in the whole affair; and then he stammered in the defence and became embarrassed and broke down, and let Mrs. Leven have it all her own way as long as he remained. But he did not remain long. The thought of Gabrielle living alone, and subject to all manner of annoyance and misconstruction because of her very generosity, filled him with courage to make an attempt for which he had long been trying to nerve himself.

'I think you spoke too strongly about Gabrielle, Constance,' Major Leven said when Taxal was gone. 'She is very foolish, but she means everything for the best; and do you know I think Taxal likes her? I have thought so this some time.'

'Yes; I am sure he likes her,' Mrs. Leven said composedly; 'and that is the very reason why I feel it my duty to warn him against her mad ways. She is very likely thinking of marrying the young man. I have a great regard for Walter Taxal, and he shall not be drawn into such a thing if I can help it. At least he shall have his eyes open.'

'I don't believe Gabrielle would marry him or anyone else,' Major Leven said.

'I could believe anything of her now. I am glad I have not a third son. I owe the death of one son to her: and but for her I might never have come to know of the degradation and the miserable end of the other.'

Major Leven winced and turned in his chair. It was fearful for one accustomed to public discussion to hear such utterly unreasonable expressions of opinion, and not to point out their lack of reason. But he knew from experience that argument in that case would only confirm the error it fondly tried to assail.

Gabrielle was not particularly delighted just then to receive a visit from Walter Taxal. She liked the young man very much; she had, indeed, something almost amounting to affection for him. He was not very clever, or brilliant, or original; and she liked men to be in some way clever, or brilliant, or original. But he was thoroughly manly, brave, and generous; she liked him, and liked him all the better because she knew that he liked her. She was almost as free with him as if he were a brother, or a cousin at least. She would send to him, or write to him at any time if she wanted anything done. She felt inclined sometimes to adopt Lady Honeybell's words, and say that Walter Taxal was her right-hand man. It had not

occurred to her, until lately, that a young man might very satisfactorily occupy that place for Lady Honeybell, who could not safely be allowed to hold the same position with regard to Gabrielle Vanthorpe. Gabrielle had very little personal self-conceit. It would have been much better for herself and for others if she had had a great deal more. Perhaps her temperament was too impetuous and eager to leave her much time for mere thinking about herself. The wrongs of somebody or other were always appealing to her for redress, and they occupied her to the exclusion of her own personal considerations. Besides, it never occurred to her to suppose that anyone could associate the name of Albert Vanthorpe's widow with any thought of marriage. She liked Walter Taxal; why should he not like her? She had not the faintest idea of falling in love with him; why should he fall in love with her?

Of late, however, as we have said already, Gabrielle did begin to have some misgivings that she had been too friendly with Walter Taxal. Gabrielle certainly was not a dull young woman; and she could not help seeing that Taxal had been trying to devote himself to her lately in a manner that suggested a claim for more than mere friendship. This troubled her, among other things. It did more than vaguely trouble her. It set her doubting much as to the wisdom of trusting to the light of her unguided impulses. It set her thinking—'Am I only doing harm, and not good, to those whom I like and would gladly serve?'

She received Walter Taxal this day, therefore, with decided mistrust and an uncomfortable apprehension that a trying scene was before her. At first the talk was only about Paulina and her disappearance. Gabrielle spoke up for unfortunate Paulina as well as she could.

'Where did you hear of all this, Mr. Taxal?' she asked, delighted that the conversation was gliding as smoothly along on such harmless ground.

'I heard it at Leven's; Mrs. Leven told me all about it.' He was growing embarrassed. Gabrielle forgot him for the moment on hearing Mrs. Leven's name.

'She blames me very much, I suppose?' Gabrielle said. 'It is strange; I was only trying to do her a kindness; and now it all ends in this way. I try to do things for the best, I think I do really, and they turn out for the worst! I am afraid I am an unlucky woman; everybody will soon have to avoid me.'

This was an unlucky remark. It drew fire at once. It

gave an opening for the very appeal Gabrielle did not wish to hear, and had been hoping even still to escape. Unluckily, too, Gabrielle accompanied it with an appealing look of her melancholy eyes, meant less for Walter Taxal than for the destinies and the powers generally that rule over humanity.

'You'll not get me to avoid you, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' the excited young man blurted out, 'or to think anything of you but that you are ever so much too good for this sort of world.altogether. Look here, Gabrielle—I've been trying to come to this a long time; I've had the words on my lips again and again, and I always broke down somehow and could not get them out; but now I will speak. Give me a right to speak for you; let me stand up for you—'

'Mr. Taxal—don't, please, talk in that way—no one is condemning me—everyone is too kind to me—almost everyone—I don't want any defenders—I have done no wrong.' She stopped for breath; she was stifled by her feelings.

'I don't mean that; I know you don't care what people say. But you know what I mean; you know I love you; I want you to be my wife. Gabrielle, Gabrielle!'

It was all out now. The worst had come. He attempted to take her hand, but she drew back, and stood so resolutely aloof that he stopped disheartened. He could not fancy that in her manner there was any of the winning coyness that only waits to be pressed. He saw that he had failed and that there was no hope.

She too began to see her way now.

'Will you come this way, Mr. Taxal? One moment, please; I do not ask you to go far or to stay long.'

Her eyes were sparkling now, her lips were trembling, there was an animation about her that he had never seen before. It almost frightened the poor young man. He remembered having heard elderly and cynical men declare as an axiom in natural philosophy that every woman has a temper, if you only wait to find it out. Could it be that this was the revelation of Gabrielle Vanthorpe's temper? Meanwhile Mr. Taxal had not the least idea as to whither she was leading him, or to what awful rite or presence he was about to be introduced.

Gabrielle crossed a corridor or two and suddenly opened a door and invited Taxal to enter with her. He obeyed. The room was darkened by the close branches of trees outside the windows, and was further gloomed by the sombre colour of the walls, the curtains, the furniture, everything. It seemed at first to his puzzled fancy like a small museum or cabinet of

curiosities. There were certainly various small objects scattered, or rather very carefully arranged, on tables and stands and in window-seats and on brackets.

A black curtain hung against one of the walls. Gabrielle drew it hastily aside and showed a white tablet.

'Look at that, Mr. Taxal,' she said; 'read that, if you please. Will you read it aloud, please?'

The astonished Taxal was rather short-sighted. He had to spoil a good deal of dramatic effect by searching for, adjusting, dropping, and adjusting again his eyeglass. Gabrielle waited meantime with what might be called monumental composure. Then he read the words, 'This room is devoted to the memory of Albert Vanthorpe, who died in Genoa——' and then followed the date of his death and the name of the English cemetery in which he lay buried.

Now Walter Taxal began to understand why he had been brought into this room. Gabrielle silently pointed to the photograph of Albert's grave.

'That is where my husband is buried,' she said. 'See, Mr. Taxal, there are memorials of him all round this room. I don't receive people here, or I might perhaps have been here when you asked me to marry you. That would have been appropriate, would it not? This would be the proper place for me to receive such a proposal.'

She smiled a wild smile. Poor Taxal felt crushed. In that mournful room, in presence of that pale face and those glittering eyes, he seemed to himself like some criminal called up for his sentence.

'You must forgive me, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' he stammered out; 'I didn't mean to give you any pain; I didn't think of it in that way; I couldn't help loving you——'

'Oh, hush, hush,' she said with a scared expression in her face, 'don't talk like that. That is why I brought you here, that you might not use words like that. See here, Mr. Taxal, there is the date of my husband's death. Almost the other day, you see; one may say only the other day. He was very fond of me; oh, so kind and good to me; and I never could repay his kindness; I never had a chance, no—not in life. All that I have I owe to him. All the poor means I have of doing good to any human creature, and of making life worth having, I owe to him. Do you think I am going to put another in his place—already?' and her wild smile this time had something in it scornful. 'Oh, no; you don't think so any more. You know now; and you will forget all this, and I shall try to

forget it, and we shall be friends once again as we were—as we always were before this.'

She seemed more reasonable now. He felt that he had the courage to say:—

'But you are so young, and you can't live always this lonely sort of life—no, don't be angry, I am not speaking now for myself any more.'

'Thank you,' she answered quite fervently; 'I knew you would not, Mr. Taxal, when I had told you.'

'No, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' the poor youth said in a resigned tone; 'I was not speaking for myself: what would be the use? But I was thinking of you—of you always living this lonely, unnatural sort of life; and you who might be so happy——'

'Oh no, not lonely, nor unnatural, nor unhappy. I am never alone, unless when I want to be. I have friends—the kindest friends a woman could have, I think; and I shall have another dear friend in time; you know whom I mean, Mr. Taxal, you know her.' She was thinking, he knew very well, of Mrs. Leven. 'How could I be unhappy? have I not you for a friend?'

'I have loved you,' he said, 'this long time——'

'Oh——' she made an effort to stop him.

'No, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' he said very quietly. 'You must let me say it now, just this once, and then I shall be done with it, don't you know; with talking of it, I mean; and that will be better for both of us. I just want to explain.'

She stood near the chimney-piece, with her eyes fixed on the photograph of Albert Vanthorpe's grave, and she allowed him to go on without interrupting.

'This long time,' he said; 'this is no new thing with me. I didn't know about poor Albert, or I might have spoken even before him, and got my dismissal long ago.' He made a feeble attempt to take it lightly. 'I want you to believe that this is no new thing and no trifling thing, but something real and deep. I want you to believe that; I should be sorry otherwise.'

'I do believe it, I believe anything you tell me, and I am so grateful to you for taking it in this way. I shall always count you among my dearest friends. One good thing of all this is that after what has passed between us we may be very, very frank to each other—and I may say how very dear you are to me, and always will be; and you will understand?'

Yes, he quite understood now. He knew that he had a faithful friend; and that in her he could never have anything more. He could bear this, but it was too soon for him to do more than endure it.

'This is a dreary room,' she said, 'for anyone but me; and I would not have brought you here, only—do you know that you are the only man who has ever been in this room since it was given up to its present purpose?'

She was not thinking of any such meaning, but her words told Taxal that he was the first who had ever approached her on the subject of marriage since Albert's death. 'There will be others,' he thought. 'Other poor fellows will be called in for sentence here, as I have been.' There was a sort of grim consolation in the thought.

'And now,' she said, 'I must not keep you in this melancholy place any longer. Good-bye, Walter: I'll call you by your name this once, to show that we are friends.'

'Good-bye, Gabrielle.'

Her name spoken in that tone came from him as the final and formal renunciation of his hopes. She came with him out of the melancholy room, and then he went away; and she went back to her sombre sanctuary. Walter Taxal certainly could not have known why she humbled herself in such penitence and grief that day before the tablet put up to poor Albert's memory. She was torturing herself with self-accusation and shame. If Taxal could have seen her self-abasement and heard her occasional ejaculations he might possibly, were he a vain young fellow, have come to the conclusion that her heart was fighting for him all the time against her conscience, and that she was now accusing herself of a tendency to yield to his appeal. But Walter was not vain; and he would not have caught from her words or her looks any thought to favour his lost hope. Yet she did speak as if there was some feeling arising within her which her over-sensitive conscience condemned as an infidelity to the memory of Albert Vanthorpe. Why was she self-reproachful? Not, surely, because a brave young man had loved her, and she had not been able to love him. There could be no substance for self-reproach in that.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GABRIELLE'S GREAT HOPE FULFILLED.

CLARKSON FIELDING presented himself at his brother's a day or two after as if nothing had occurred.

'Why, Clarkson, I thought you had gone off to California or Patagonia again,' Sir Wilberforce said. 'Where were you all this time? We were quite alarmed about you.'

Fielding wondered who were the 'we'; but did not ask any question. He had been schooling himself down a good deal during his absence. He explained that he had been back to his old lodgings for a while.

'I have a lot of things to put in order there, you know,' he said; 'papers and all that. I think of going off somewhere again; one must do something.'

'Don't see why you could not make up your mind to stay here,' Sir Wilberforce said. 'There's plenty for you to do, you know, Clarkson. I have a good deal of your money—it's yours and not mine; poor father would always have it kept for you, and so there's no compliment in the matter; and there are lots of things to do in England. You must have knocked about the world quite enough, I am inclined to think. Settle down, my boy, settle down. Politics, now—quite fascinating, I believe, for people who have an interest in that sort of thing. I dare say that many people think I ought to be in the House of Commons. Poor father would certainly have liked one of us to be in the House, I know. But I haven't any taste that way; practical science is more my line. Why can't you go in for politics? You could get a seat as easily as anything.'

'I don't think I should be much of a success, Wilberforce; I'm afraid I don't quite understand all about the county franchise and the judicature bill.'

'But foreign affairs, you know—the Eastern Question, American politics and that sort of thing. You might talk very well on such subjects as that—when occasion required, of course; when occasion required. I believe lots of the men in the House know nothing of foreign politics, or of anything, by Jove, for that matter. And then you need not speak unless you liked. It's not by any means necessary for a man to speak. Some of the best men in the House never open their mouths, I'm told.'

'Perhaps my political opinions wouldn't agree with yours, Wilberforce. I am an awful Radical, you know—a sort of Red Republican.'

'God bless my soul! you don't say so? I had no idea at all. But that won't last, I dare say. All young men are that way, I fancy. It passes off; it's like falling in love, and infidelity, and so on. Still, it would be better to wait perhaps. Well, then, let me see, there's the army. You wouldn't think of the army?'

'A little past the time for beginning, I am afraid,' Fielding said, with all possible gravity.

'Yes, yes; I dare say it is. But the volunteers, now—'

why not the volunteers? A commission might be got, I dare say; do they have a commission in the volunteers? Anyhow, you might become a captain of volunteers and take a lot of interest in the drill and the marching and all that; it gives one something to think about.'

Fielding shook his head.

'I don't think I should care for mere playing at soldiers,' he said.

'Well, well, there are no end of other things. Why, let me see—the bar, for instance. Why not the bar, Clarkson? You might go in for being Lord Chancellor one of these days.'

'Why not the Church?' Clarkson asked.

Sir Wilberforce looked up in sudden doubt as to whether Clarkson was really serious this time.

'Well, yes; the Church of course, if a man had any turn that way; what could be better? If he really had a turn that way, Clarkson; but I don't know, somehow.'

'You don't think I have a turn that way, Wilberforce, and you are quite right. It was only a very stupid joke of mine. I am greatly afraid I have no turn for anything that is steady or good or respectable, and I doubt whether I am young enough to mend. I think I am at my best when knocking about the world. At least I don't get in anybody's way then——'

'Come, now, Clarkson, you mustn't talk in that way—no, no, you must not indeed. That sounds as if you thought we did not want you here, and that isn't so, you know; it really isn't.'

Again Clarkson mentally wondered who were 'we.'

'I didn't mean that, indeed, Wilberforce.'

'No, no,' Wilberforce went on; 'we couldn't stand that, you know; I couldn't afford to lose you again just after finding you. I haven't been so happy for years as since you turned up. I don't mean to say that I kept thinking of you all the time you were away as much as I ought to have done; people don't, you know. You had become a sort of myth to me, my boy; like the wandering Jew, or the Man in the Moon, or something. But I am really delighted that you have turned up, and I feel monstrously obliged to Mrs. Vanthorpe for having brought us together—Gad, what a trump of a woman she is! I have something to talk to you about presently concerning her, but just now I want to have this out with you about your leaving England, which I think is very unnecessary and unwise; and I don't like it at all. I want you here. There are only the two of us, and there's nothing now to keep us asunder.'

There was something very moving in the earnest simplicity of Wilberforce. Clarkson felt greatly touched by it.

'We ought to have known each other much sooner, Wilberforce. I shouldn't have spent so much of my life knocking aimlessly about the world if I had known what sort of a fellow you were.' Then he told Wilberforce of the time when he actually came to that house with the intention of seeing and speaking to his brother, and how, happening to see Wilberforce on his horse preparing for a ride, he changed his mind and did not make himself known.

'God bless my soul, Clarkson, what an extraordinary thing to do! I never heard of such a thing. Why, I should have been delighted to see you; I always thought poor father was too hard, you know. Gad, he was often hard enough on me, I can tell you; I hadn't it all my own way, by any means.'

'Well, you see one result of it all,' said the younger brother, 'is that I can't settle to anything, Wilberforce. I don't think I could bring myself to sit down to any steady pursuit; I am not young enough to begin all over again.'

'Better try, better try before you give up,' Wilberforce said cheerily. 'Turn to something for a while, anyhow. Art, now; I suppose you haven't any taste that way?'

Fielding shook his head.

'Literature? Lots of fellows write books nowadays that don't seem to me a bit better than you might do, or anyone if he only tried. Then there's business; the City. You might do something in banking, or the China trade; capital things; keep a fellow at work and give him something to think of. I wish you would turn your attention to practical science with me; I could find you occupation enough, and we could work together; and you have no idea what a hold it takes on you once you go into it.'

'I think I should like to try a little exploring,' the younger man said with some hesitation.

'Africa and that sort of thing? I don't think I would do that, Clarkson. It's used up, isn't it? Every fellow does exploring in Africa now, and reads a paper at the Geographical Society, and writes a book with queer pictures of black men and women. I don't think I would turn to that if I were you. No, my boy, stay at home for the present at all events; I can't let you go away just yet.'

Fielding made no answer. It was hard not to yield to his brother's kindly pressure, and yet he felt that the one thing he now could not do was to remain in London. It was easy, however,

to turn aside the stream of any conversation in which Sir Wilberforce was engaged, and Fielding did so now by reminding him that he had something to tell about Mrs. Vanthorpe. Fielding fully expected to hear that Sir Wilberforce had proposed for her and been accepted. But it was only about Paulina. Sir Wilberforce told of his own intervention, and how it had ended, and how Paulina had disappeared. All this was very interesting news to the young man. He cordially approved of all that Wilberforce had done, and gave him fresh reasons drawn from his own knowledge of Paulina's history to make Wilberforce satisfied that he had taken the right course. But Clarkson kept thinking all the time how unsuccessful had been his attempt to induce Gabrielle to listen to reason. Wilberforce seemingly had had his own way without any trouble, and spoke almost as one who already had authority in the matter. The African exploring enterprise began to commend itself more and more to the younger brother while he listened to the narrative of the elder.

'I think I shall ask her to marry me, Clarkson; I really think I shall,' Wilberforce said abruptly.

'You haven't done so yet?'

'No, I haven't done so yet. I have been turning it over in my mind; I begin to think more and more that it would be the very best thing I could do. Don't you think so, Clarkson, eh?'

'She would make any man whom she married very happy I am sure; unless he were a very stupid man,' Clarkson said emphatically. His brother's eyes lighted with pleasure.

'The thing is, would she have me, Clarkson? There's the rub, isn't it? I'm not young, you see; not what she would call young; and I'm not particularly good-looking; never was; and I'm not clever. I shouldn't like to ask her, if I were to be refused; I don't mind about myself, being refused; I mean I should not hesitate about asking her on that ground merely; a man must take his chance—eh? But I shouldn't like the idea of annoying her, you know; and then perhaps if she wouldn't marry me it wouldn't be right to go and see her any more for a long time; and, by Jove, Clarkson, I shouldn't like that one bit. Do you know I have a great idea of taking Leven into my confidence; he's a nice fellow, Leven. Do you know him?—no? You must know him.' Come over there with me one day. To ask Leven whether he thinks she would be likely to have me—there wouldn't be anything indelicate in that, Clarkson, you don't think?'

'Sir Wilberforce talked on, and Clarkson had to listen and do his best not to seem either disturbed or wanting in interest. Then Sir Wilberforce proposed that they should both call on Gabrielle that day.

'She'll be glad to see you, Clarkson; she thinks you are a little huffed, I believe, or something of that sort, because she didn't take your advice about that woman; but you are not of course, are you? I told her I was sure you were not. Now you shall go and pay her a visit along with me, and we'll show her that you are not a bit put out; and she'll be pleased, I know.'

Did Clarkson like to go? Did he dislike to go? He could not have told anyone; he could not have made it clear to himself if he had tried. A wise and strong man doubtless would not have gone; but on the other hand a still wiser and stronger man would surely have gone and schooled his feelings so that no one should suspect that he was concerned about anything in particular. Clarkson decided to go. In his heart he was glad of any excuse for seeing Gabrielle, and he told his reason and conscience that it was necessary he should go lest Wilberforce should suspect anything and be put to useless pain. His feelings towards Wilberforce were a curious compound of gratitude, affection, and a sort of compassion, such as one has for some child or woman whose simple goodness deprecates intellectual criticism.

They walked to Gabrielle's, and Wilberforce talked all the way of his projects and successes in the application of practical science to English domestic life. Clarkson compelled himself to listen and answer, although he sometimes longed to shout out as a relief to the tension of his feelings. At Gabrielle's a surprise awaited the brothers. A visitor was there whom they never expected to see. They found Mrs. Leven in affectionate companionship with Gabrielle.

Walter Taxal in the fulness of his emotions told Mrs. Leven the first time he met her of his bitter disappointment and of Gabrielle's unconquerable devotion to the memory of Albert. Poor Taxal never supposed that he had any rival but the dead Albert. He knew that Albert's mother credited Albert's widow with a desire to marry again, and many warning hints had been given him to understand that Mrs. Leven suspected Gabrielle of a desire to marry him. Inspired partly by a kind of resentment, as if Mrs. Leven had betrayed him to his disappointment, and partly by a chivalrous resolve to set Gabrielle right in Mrs. Leven's eyes, the young man told all that had

happened to him; how he had made love and been rejected, and not merely rejected but rebuked, and how he had come away from Gabrielle's presence and her remonstrances almost as penitent as if he had been doing some wrong. Albert Vanthorpe, according to him, was the girl's saint. She was devoting herself to his memory; she would bury her youth in his grave.

Then with a rush Mrs. Leven's old affection for the young woman came back. The girl who thus honoured Constance Leven's son could not be unworthy of Constance Leven's love. Even in her best moods Mrs. Leven regarded things and people in the light of personal property or appanages. She loved her son Albert while he continued devoted to her; she was angry with him when he became devoted to Gabrielle. She never could forgive the elder son who had shown that he could live without her. She loved Gabrielle while Gabrielle was like a particularly submissive daughter. She grew angry with the girl when Gabrielle showed that she could have a will and a conscience of her own. But now Gabrielle had proved her devotion to the memory of Constance Leven's son, and this was homage to Constance Leven. She had a fitful nature, swept every now and then from the moorings of conscience and reason by some strong and stormy gust of emotion. She quarrelled with her son Philip in a fit of emotion; she quarrelled with Gabrielle in the same way; she had married Major Leven in the same way. Now came another current of emotion, and it drove her to Gabrielle's side. It was characteristic of Mrs. Leven that she never for a moment doubted as to the manner in which her overtures would be received. She simply pardoned Gabrielle. She told her husband that she was greatly pleased by the young woman's devotion to Albert's memory. She ordered her carriage, and straightway delighted and bewildered Gabrielle by presenting herself in her daughter-in-law's house and announcing that she had made up her mind to forgive Gabrielle and that they were to be friends once more. It was on the very day of this reconciliation that Sir Wilberforce and Fielding went together to see Gabrielle.

They found Gabrielle overflowing with the rapture of her recovered friendship. Her joy shone through her. She besought of Wilberforce and Clarkson to be witnesses of, and sharers in, her happiness. Wilberforce was simply delighted. He thought it all did the highest honour to her head and heart. It was another reason for admiration of her to find that she was so devoted to the elder lady. 'Gad, there isn't too much of that sort of thing among girls to-day,' he thought. He liked Mrs.

Leven, too, from the first. There was something imposing and stately about her. If a man must have a mother-in-law he thought it was not easy to see how he could have a nicer mother-in-law than that, and, by Jove, he didn't believe half the bad things that were said about mothers-in-law. He had thought of this even before Mrs. Leven's reconciliation with Gabrielle, and now of course he was prepared to like her all the better. Mrs. Leven for her part much liked him. He seemed so good-humoured, so respectable, and so strong, that she could not but like him. She was getting not to like young men much. They were all too opinionated, too full of their own whims and conceits. They thought too much of themselves in every way. She found herself thinking that if she were to have a son-in-law she should like just such a man as Sir Wilberforce Fielding. Even at that moment she wondered what Gabrielle thought of him, and she began to find the doubt coming up in her mind whether it would not be wrong to expect Gabrielle to live lonely all her life because of her devotion to Albert Vanthorpe's memory.

The younger Fielding she did not like at all, and Fielding disliked her with a curious instinct. He would have disliked her because she had treated Gabrielle so badly all this long time, but he disliked her now because she had chosen to be reconciled in that imperious and queenly way, and because Gabrielle put up with it and did homage for it, and was overwhelmed with joy because of it. In truth he found himself perhaps for the moment of less importance than he could have liked in that little circle. He did not seem to have any particular place there. He felt sure Mrs. Leven would put Gabrielle against him if she could, and Gabrielle now was in a mood of mind to believe anything Mrs. Leven told her.

Yet Gabrielle did not neglect Fielding. On the contrary, she thanked and praised him again and again for the earnest advice he had given her, and she told Mrs. Leven how much she was obliged to him and how ungracious she feared she had been. Mrs. Leven from the first moment felt an antipathy to the young man, and thought his presence there of sinister import. She remembered what Major Leven had told her of him; she saw in him the very young man to turn a girl away from the deference and devotion due to her elders.

'Your brother is not like you, Sir Wilberforce,' she said in an undertone; 'I should never have known him to be anyone of your family.'

'Well, Clarkson's so much younger, you see,' the good-

natured Wilberforce explained. 'And then, Mrs. Leven, he's such a good-looking young fellow. We hadn't the same mother, you know; and he's been all about the world, while I have been stagnating here.'

'Yes, I heard that he was a good deal about the world,' Mrs. Leven said with significant emphasis.

'And he wants to go all about the world again, Mrs. Leven, much to my dissatisfaction, I can assure you. I tell him that he had much better remain at home and settle down.'

'Young men find it very hard to settle down, I believe, when they have lived much of that sort of life. I have had some experience of that kind in my own family.'

'Yes, yes; so I have heard; sorry to hear it; great trouble to you, of course.'

'We owe a great deal to your kindness and energy in that matter, Sir Wilberforce—of the person who unfortunately was married by my elder son.'

'Don't mention it,' Sir Wilberforce hastened to say. 'I thought it was a pity, you know, that Mrs. Vauthorpe should be troubled, and I was afraid that she would be put upon—wouldn't understand things—that's why I took the liberty of calling on Major Leven about it; and very good of you both, I'm sure, to forgive my intrusion.'

'It is not always,' Mrs. Leven said with a sigh, 'that one can find such delicate and judicious advice and help in a family disgrace; for of course it is a disgrace.'

'Oh, by Jove, you know, as to that, every family has something of that kind, I dare say, if we only knew. There will be wild young fellows always. But I hope you have not heard any more from that lady—that person, Mrs. Leven.'

'We have not heard from her since. No. Major Leven is in some alarm about her, unnecessarily, I think. She has no claim on us any further. We made her what I think a very liberal offer, and she rejected it insolently. I don't see what more she can have to do with us. I am not in the least uneasy about anything she can do.'

'Still, I think I would have bought her off, if I were you,' Fielding the younger said. Gabrielle and he had now joined in the conversation on the mention of Paulina. 'She's capable of anything.'

'We offered her a yearly sum enough to maintain her in respectability,' Mrs. Leven answered in somewhat stately style; 'I would not consent to go any further than that.'

'It's no use standing on one's dignity with a woman of that

kind,' Fielding urged. 'She can annoy you, and you can't annoy her.'

'I don't believe the poor creature is half as bad as all that,' Gabrielle pleaded earnestly. 'She showed by her conduct in this house that she has some generous impulses.'

Something was said about the alarm given to poor Miss Elvin, which, however, only seemed to amuse Sir Wilberforce.

'Where is that girl now?' Fielding asked in his abrupt way, turning to Gabrielle.

'She has gone on a visit to Lady Honeybell's; Lady Honeybell is very kind to her.'

'I'd let her stay at Lady Honeybell's, if I were you,' said Fielding. 'I don't like that girl; there's something treacherous about her look.'

'It seems to me that you don't like any of my friends,' Gabrielle said.

'That young man gives his opinion much too dogmatically,' Mrs. Leven thought to herself. 'If I were Gabrielle I would not allow him to talk in that sort of way. I must advise her. How unlike he is to his brother!'

'Major Leven is having a great meeting somewhere to-night, isn't he?' Sir Wilberforce asked her.

'He is—at St. James's Hall. Something about a colony. I do not quite understand the subject.'

'Sure to be some good cause,' Sir Wilberforce politely said.

'Major Leven only lives for every good cause,' Gabrielle declared with fervour.

'Young Taxal is to speak, I see,' Sir Wilberforce said. 'I should like to go if I cared more about politics: but I don't. Are you going, Mrs. Leven?'

'No; I did not think of going; unless, Gabrielle, you would like to come, dear?'

'Oh, no,' Gabrielle answered hastily, and growing a little red; 'I should not like to go.'

Mrs. Leven at once understood Gabrielle's reason for not going, and her confusion. It was because Walter Taxal was to be there. 'Very proper and very becoming on her part,' she thought—'she is a dear girl, and my own Gabrielle still!'

The brothers presently went away. As Clarkson was going, Gabrielle held out her hand to him and looked in his face with an expression of so much happiness and such an appeal for his sympathy in her happiness, that the heart of the young man was touched to the quick. She seemed so joyous, so anxious that all the world should share her joy, so unconscious of any

reason why anyone now should not be happy, that it seemed to him as if a formal declaration from her that she cared nothing about him could not have been more conclusive. Some expression of this must have come into his face, for he saw a sudden look of surprise and almost of pain come into hers. She felt as if for some unknown reason the friend to whom she specially looked for sympathy in her happiness was refusing it to her.

'Why should she care about me?' he thought. 'She will marry Wilberforce and be very happy.' His mind was more than ever made up to leave England. He now only thought of how this could be done with least pain to his brother. '*She* will not care.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

'FURENS QUID FEMINA.'

THE great public meeting about which Sir Wilberforce spoke to Mrs. Leven took place that night. It was to be a grand popular, not to say national, demonstration. People were streaming into St. James's Hall for more than an hour before the opening of the proceedings. Huge placards at the doors invited the public to keep streaming in still. The stalls, the whole floor of the hall, the galleries, and the platform—admission to this latter place being for those privileged with special tickets—were soon filled by an excited crowd. Major Leven and his friends had found a really delightful grievance to charge against the government. The Colonial office had intimated to the colonists of Victorietta that it would be a proper thing for them to take on themselves a certain share of the cost of defending the colony against invasion on the part of any aggressive foreign power. The colony of Victorietta had been for a long time anxious to connect itself with the great political movements of the world. It had looked with jealousy upon the exciting complications, entanglements, and dangers which other dependencies of the British Crown were privileged to enjoy. Canada, India, New Zealand, the Cape, even Jamaica, occasionally gave subject for great political and parliamentary excitement, while ambitious Victorietta was hardly ever named in the British Senate. This was humiliating for some of the nobler spirits among the colonists. They therefore got up a panic of invasion. It became a theory with them that the eyes of all foreign states hostile to England, or jealous of

her, were fixed with especial keenness on the little colony, and that the unfriendly statesmanship of continental Europe regarded Victoriëtta as the very place where the severest blow could be given to England's strength and pride. Victoriëtta was a small island situated in the midst of a positive waste of ocean. It was not known even by name in most of the continental chancelleries. Many otherwise excellent maps omitted to give it a place. But the colonists nevertheless persuaded themselves that the eyes of hostile Europe were on them, and that projects for the invasion of Victoriëtta were occupying the minds of the French, the Germans, the Russians, the Americans, and the Fenians. They got up an elaborate and extensive plan of fortifications and they called for the loan of a fleet and an army from the parent country. The colonial minister refused to believe in any imminent danger. He pointed with pedantic official obstinacy to the fact that there was no continent anywhere nearer to the island than three thousand miles, and that her nearest neighbour was a great English colony. The statesmen of Victoriëtta were not to be thus put off. They pressed their demand again and again; they sent a deputation to London; they besieged the Colonial Office. The Colonial Office held out, and would go no further than an offer to bear part of the expense if the alarmed islanders would bear the remainder; and the expense was in any case to be only that of a very much moderated project of fortification and defence. Then the deputation turned to the British public and got hold of Major Leven and Walter Taxal. A pretty vigorous agitation set in. The newspapers took up the quarrel. It was made the subject of several questions, various notices of motion and one 'count-out' in the House of Commons. The impression on one side of the controversy was that the glory of England was gone for ever if the patriotic representations of Victoriëtta should be disregarded by a degenerate British Ministry. The contention, on the other hand, was that the last straw would be laid upon the back of that cruelly overburdened camel the British taxpayer if the cost of any part of the defences of Victoriëtta were to be imposed on him. The one class of patriots appealed to the memories of Drake and Raleigh; the other to the economical precepts of Mr. Cobden.

Major Leven flung himself into the battle. He was heart and soul with the cause of Victoriëtta. He would have gone in, if the colonial patriots desired it, for fortifying their island with a triple wall of brass. He listened with full and ready faith to all the stories which told of plans actually drawn up

by the military authorities of St. Petersburg, or Berlin, or Washington, for the occupation of Victorietta in the event of a war with England. He had no words strong enough to express his indignation and contempt for the unworthy and unpatriotic ministry who could think of the money cost on such an occasion. He got up the meeting at St. James's Hall. A peer who had in his long-past early days been under-secretary for the colonies for about three months, and was never invited to occupy any office again, was announced as the chairman of the meeting. The people of England, men and women, were invited by placard to attend in their thousands and stand up for the rights of the colonies which are at once the ornament and the strength of England. Major Leven's name was put prominently forward as one of the speakers. The night came, and the hall, as we have said, was crowded. It was evident from the first that opinion was not wholly unanimous. Major Leven represented the more popular side undoubtedly, and the more numerous party; but there was a considerable force of economical dissent and scepticism. The ladies of England were not unrepresented. Claudia Lemuel and some of her friends were in one of the galleries.

Walter Taxal was present. He had promised to speak, and he kept his word, although it must be owned that his mind was almost as far away from the hall as the slighted Victorietta itself. Mr. Lefussis was bustling about the committee-room and the platform full of excitement and hyperbole. The Chairman spoke, and his speech was listened to with that respect which the British public usually show for a peer well stricken in years, who is understood to have held office in the dim time when there really were English statesmen. Walter Taxal spoke with great vigour and fluency. No one would have thought that the young man was deeply depressed at heart, and that for the moment he honestly believed life for the rest to be a blank to him. Mr. Lefussis spoke, but became rather too excited and sputtered a little, and was unlucky enough to raise a laugh or two, thereby putting the meeting somewhat out of tune for the first time. Mr. Lefussis became angry, and declared in vehement tone that that was no occasion for laughter to any true-hearted Englishman. This, however, did not do much good, and Mr. Lefussis finished up rather a failure. Major Leven set about to retrieve the prestige of the cause.

Major Leven spoke with a fervour of sincerity and conviction that well nigh supplied the place of eloquence. He

denounced the iniquity of the ministers, Liberal or Conservative, be they who they might, who would neglect and discard a loyal and devoted colony, however small. He made a telling point by comparing Victoriotta to an unhappy step-daughter, who, rejected from the hearth that ought to have burned for her with a genial and protecting glow, is sent out to be at the mercy of a cold and heartless world. The impression produced by the closing sentences was decidedly good. Mr. Lefussis, who now took on himself to act the part of fugleman, rose to his feet and directed the rounds of applause by waving his kerchief energetically round his head. The audience were fairly hit home, it would seem, and even the grumblers and the discontent hardly ventured to breathe their dissent in tones above a whispered sneer.

But when the repeated applause was at length allowed to die away and some other orator was preparing to take up the tale, the audience were amazed to hear the voice of a woman send shrilly through the hall the following remarkable words :

‘Mr. Chairman, before you go any further, sir, I want to ask Major Leven why he turned his own step-daughter out of doors, and left her to starve or to beg? As we are on the subject of step-daughters, perhaps he would not mind telling the meeting something about his own conduct and his wife’s to their step-daughter.’

The words, though all clearly spoken, were rattled off so volubly that they were got fairly into the ears of the assembly before anyone had time even to cry ‘order.’ Every eye was turned on the new speaker. There she stood in one of the central rows of the stalls, a tall, handsome woman, who kept her attitude of orator with entire composure, and was evidently determined to address the audience at some length upon this rather inappropriate family topic. Then there were loud cries of ‘order, order,’ from those who sympathised with the object of the meeting, and ironical calls of ‘bravo,’ ‘hear, hear,’ ‘woman’s rights for ever,’ and other such irreverent interjections from the few who liked to see a little disturbance of any kind. ‘Is she mad?’ several cool neutrals were heard to ask of each other. Some ladies in the neighbourhood of the fair speaker were alarmed and tried to get out of their seats, but could not for the pressure of the crowd.

‘I am not mad!’ exclaimed, in tones growing yet more shrilly, the undaunted woman, ‘although I have been treated so as to make any woman mad. I won’t hear a man talking about step-daughters like a hypocrite, when he has had his own

step-daughter turned out of the house into the streets. I'm her—let him deny it if he can.'

Wild clamour followed this declaration. Major Leven rose to his feet, and was seen to be gesticulating earnestly, but no word he spoke reached the bewildered audience. Evidently Paulina Vanthorpe—for it was she, we need hardly say, who claimed a hearing—had some sympathisers or confederates among the audience: there were cries of 'hear her, hear her,' 'let the woman speak,' 'she's not mad,' 'she's all right enough,' 'no police here,' 'fair play for the lady,' and various other such expressions of opinion.

'I ask to be heard,' screamed the much-injured woman. 'If this is a meeting of English men and women, I know they won't refuse me a hearing. I'll show you what sort of men are trying to pass off as patriots and philanthropists'—for it has to be recorded that thus, and not otherwise, did Paulina pronounce the rather trying word. Shouts of anger, laughter, and applause followed this outburst of emotional eloquence. The platform was observed to be in wild commotion. Excited conference was going on between Major Leven, the Chairman, Mr. Lefussis, and others. Some of the promoters of the meeting had managed to get out at the back of the platform, and to bring in a policeman or two at the other end of the hall. But the policemen could do nothing. They could not get to Paulina through the crowd; and in any case Paulina could only be considered as a speaker who seemed anxious to introduce irrelevant topics into her speech. It was a question for the authority of the Chairman rather than that of the ministers of the law. Paulina's quick eye detected the presence of the police.

'He wants to have me removed by the police,' she cried. 'He is afraid to face the truth—he knows he cannot deny what I say of him. I ask of all true Englishmen not to let an injured daughter be illtreated by the blue-coated minions of a despotic government.'

Paulina was positively developing a genius for popular oratory. In the excitement of her cause, too, her theory as to the relationship between her and Major Leven began to assume more formidable proportions. She had grown at one bound from his wife's daughter-in-law to his own step-daughter; she now threatened to become his daughter. The intensity of the scene was suddenly enhanced in an unexpected manner by the intervention of Claudia Lemuel. That excitable young lady, being in one of the galleries, was aware that some woman was

trying to address the meeting, but she had not heard Paulina's words. She assumed that Paulina was presenting herself as the representative of some great cause or other, and that an attempt was being made to eject her simply because she was a woman. The heroic little Claudia pressed forward to the front of the gallery, and cried out in tones of earnest appeal :

'In the name of the women of England I demand a hearing for this woman ! This is a free meeting in a free country ; it is an outrage upon all womanhood to deny a hearing to a woman.'

Matters became more complicated than ever. The large number of persons who did not understand the proceedings at all now assumed from Claudia's words that some injustice was really being done to Paulina, and that she actually had something to say. A great many voices therefore began to cry out that the woman ought to be heard. At length the Chairman rose and came to the front of the platform and made signs that he desired to speak. There were very general cries of 'hear the Chairman,' 'chair, chair,' 'order, order,' and so forth. Many really respected the Chairman and his authority, and some who did not particularly care for either wished to have him heard because they thought he could explain what all the row was about.

'This lady is really out of order,' the Chairman began.

'I ain't out of order,' Paulina exclaimed. 'Does Major Leven say he don't know me ? Does he say I ain't the widow of his wife's son ?' The question was received with new demonstrations of impatience on one side and amused approval on the other. The Chairman was observed to whisper to Major Leven.

'This meeting is not the place to discuss the family affairs of any gentleman,' the Chairman began.

'He admits the charge !' screamed the triumphant Paulina. 'English men and women, you hear that he admits it !'

'This meeting is called to discuss a great public and national question,' the Chairman pleaded. 'This lady does not rise to propose any amendment to the resolution'——

'Yes, I do,' Paulina cried.

'She does, she does,' was chorussed by many delighted voices.

'Will the lady have the goodness to state the terms of her amendment ?' the noble Chairman asked blandly but firmly.

'This is my amendment !' screamed Paulina : 'That we free-born Britons refuse to be dictated to by humbugs.' Roars

of laughter, cries of 'order,' shouts of applause, and wild general confusion followed this astonishing proposition. Paulina looked round the hall in triumph, as if she had done something really brilliant this time, and she nodded her head this way and that in approval of herself and acceptance of the well-earned applause of others. Major Leven rose and came to the front of the platform, but finding it utterly impossible to obtain a hearing, and the clamour of his friends being as much in his way as the laughter and shouts of his enemies, he bowed and returned to his seat. His face was crimson with shame and vexation. Mr. Lefussis sprang forward and shrieked some words of which no one caught the meaning, and shook his hand in futile wrath at enemies who answered him with shouts of laughter. The heroine of the evening being, in parliamentary phrase, on her legs, remained there, and seemed evidently determined to have a hearing or let no one else be heard.

The Chairman made another appeal for silence, and had a momentary success. He declared that, according to his judgment, the amendment proposed by the lady was not in order, and could not be properly entertained. Thereupon several men, some excited, some only amused, rose up and cried out all together that the amendment was perfectly in order. One tall, stout man, who had the advantage of a voice that seemed to clear the air like thunder, and could have been heard amid roll of drum, compelled the meeting to listen to him while he argued that, as Major Leven had proposed a resolution condemning the government, it was in perfect order to offer an amendment to the effect that the meeting declined to be dictated to by humbugs. He demanded that the noble Chairman should show fair play, and give the lady an opportunity of supporting her amendment by argument and illustration. There was a good deal of applause for this. It sounded reasonable enough, some unconcerned persons thought. A sort of dialogue set in between the Chairman and the man with the voice of thunder. It was a relief to many present when a man spoke whose tones made it impossible not to hear him.

'Why do you refuse this lady a hearing?' the deep-toned one demanded. 'Is it, my lord, because she is a woman?'

The noble Chairman, with words and gestures, deprecated any such ungallant intention.

'Then why is she not to be heard, my lord?' the rolling thunder asked.

'This meeting has not been called for the discussion of any private controversies,' the Chairman said, with bland plaintive-

ness, wishing in his heart he had never listened to the entreaties of Major Leven or consented to have anything to do with the meeting.

‘But we have not heard what the lady has to say for her amendment, my lord. I presume she intends to support it on public grounds.’ He looked with prodigious deference towards the heroic Paulina as if he were giving her the assurance that she should be heard under the shelter of his voice.

‘Yes, I do,’ Paulina exclaimed, panting. ‘I’ll give you public grounds enough if you will only hear me. Fair play, my lord; oh, fair play! I appeal for fair play to my countrymen and my countrywomen.’

Then there was a renewed storm of contending voices, some clamouring for Paulina to be heard and some calling for the police, for the Chairman, for order, for anything else that occurred to them at the moment as preferable to the eloquence of Paulina. The intrepid Paulina herself now mounted on to the seat from which she had risen, and from that vantage-ground endeavoured to make herself heard, as with voluble tongue and vivacious gesture she denounced the Chairman, Major Leven, and the promoters of the meeting generally. Soon in every part of the room was someone addressing the Chairman, or the meeting at large. The cause of order and of Victoriotta was hopeless for that night. The wrongs of the colony were forgotten. The Chairman gave up the battle. He quietly withdrew from the platform. Major Leven followed him rather hastily, pursued by some shrieking taunt from the conquering heroine, and by shouts of laughter from the irreverent and the unconcerned. Major Leven would have felt it a positive relief if, as he was escaping from the platform, he had heard the crack of doom. Those who favoured the cause of Victoriotta now left the hall as quickly as they could. Those who remained elected a chairman of their own on the spur of the moment, and carried a resolution, proposed by the man with the thunder-tones, approving of the conduct of the government. Paulina then modestly withdrew, followed by a few admiring friends. She wiped her heated brow, as she went, for the moment heedless of the paint. She was on fire with triumph and gratified spleen. She had indeed wrestled well and overthrown more than her enemies. Thus is history sometimes made. It is probable that the island of Victoriotta will be left undefended for ever merely because Paulina Vanthorpe happened to have a spite against Major Leven. Paulina is to be added to the company of Helen and Cleopatra and the wife of Prince Breffni and

Florinda, and all the other famous ladies whose personal wrongs and quarrels disturbed the progress of States.

The papers next morning were filled with accounts of the astonishing proceedings in St. James's Hall. Most of the reports wooed the eye of even the most indifferent reader by the temptation of large-type headings and the words 'Extraordinary Scene at St. James's Hall;' lengthened and vivacious descriptions were given, in which of course the appearance of Paulina, her manner, and her startling eloquence, obtained full justice. Some of the papers had pleasant leading articles holding up the promoters of the meeting to playful ridicule. The noble Chairman's face grew a deep red as he glanced over the journals at his breakfast. In the fulness of his heart he cursed Major Leven; and, although in general a devoted friend of liberty of the press, he began to think there was a good deal to be said after all in favour of some despotic system to restrain these confounded newspapers. Major Leven was even more angry with those at the meeting who supported Paulina than with Paulina herself. He waxed eloquent over the degeneracy of the English nation when men could be found with such levity in them as to prefer the encouragement of a piece of mad foolery to the calm discussion of a great cause and the redress of a great wrong. He began seriously to think of emigrating to some happier and less effete country, where the corruptions of luxury had not so completely wasted the spirit of patriotism, justice, and manhood. Of one thing he was certain—the hand of the Colonial Office was in the whole affair. The colonial minister had employed some wretched minions to make use of that infamous woman. Indeed, he began to think now that Paulina had been in the pay of the government from first to last. He declared that such ministers were capable of anything. This thought consoled him. It had the soothing effect produced upon an author when he convinces himself that the disparaging reviews of his masterpiece are the result of a vile conspiracy got up by jealous hate to crush him. Major Leven would have felt utterly crushed if he were not satisfied that the Colonial Office was trying to crush him. This thought gave him nerve to bear the light of the sun.

Mrs. Leven was impetuous. She was for taking instant proceedings against Paulina; dragging her to the bar of justice somewhere and inflicting the direst punishment upon her. She was for making no compromise, shrinking from no publicity, drawing the sword and throwing the scabbard away. 'There must be laws,' she declared indignantly. It was idle to point

out that, although there were laws, it might not be easy to bring any one of them to bear on that particular case in the way Mrs. Leven desired. She urged Major Leven to prosecute Paulina at once—she would not have quailed, to do her justice, before any exposure of family scandals. But Major Leven shook his head.

‘It’s no use, Constance,’ he said; ‘the Colonial Office is behind her, don’t you see? She must have some power at her back. No paid magistrate would punish her.’

Walter Taxal wrote a few lines recommending Major Leven to hold another meeting on the same subject and to have the admission by tickets only. But he said that, for reasons he need not explain to Mrs. Leven, he was resolved to leave town for the present. A little knocking about would do him good, he said. Sir Wilberforce gave hearty good advice to Major and Mrs. Leven not to bother about Paulina and her goings on at all. ‘A nine days’ wonder—soon die away, soon forgotten, if you only let it alone.’ As to the scandal, there were scandals everywhere, he suggested. There was one person to whom the goings-on of Paulina gave unmixed delight, and that was Miss Elvin. The singer became quite an object of curiosity and interest herself by virtue of the vivacious descriptions she was able to give of Gabrielle Vanthorpe’s sister-in-law. She became so sprightly on the subject at Lady Honeybell’s, that Lady Honeybell snubbed her at last, expressed the warmest sympathy and admiration for ‘that dear young thing, Mrs. Vanthorpe,’ and left Miss Elvin with a deeper sense of wrong against Gabrielle than ever.

To Clarkson Fielding the manner in which Paulina had chosen to relieve her spleen seemed, all things considered, highly satisfactory. He knew that there were two sides to her nature—one that of the hoyden, the other that of the tigress. It looked as if she had made up her mind to appease her wrath in this instance by no worse vengeance than something in the nature of a practical joke. A few days after the meeting, however, the London public were amused and amazed by a letter which appeared in several of the newspapers and was signed ‘Paulina Vanthorpe.’ It professed to be a defence of the writer against some of the comments made upon her in the press, and against the attempt of the noble chairman to suppress her speech at the meeting. She declared that she had come forward under the influence of purely patriotic motives, as an Englishwoman, to save her countrymen from being made the instruments of a self-seeking and hypocritical clique. She

announced that she intended before many days to hold a meeting of her own in some public hall in London and invite Englishmen of all parties there to hear a tale of wrong and of suffering which would make the heart of every honest man and pitying woman glow with sympathy and indignation. Major Leven writhed when he read this manifesto. 'They'll make a heroine of her, you'll find, Constance—some people will,' he groaned.

'I told you, George,' his wife said with that gentle firmness which becomes those who gave good advice that was not taken—'I told you this creature would give trouble if she were left at large. She ought to have been met boldly and sent to prison at once.'

'But, my dear, you couldn't have sent her to prison.'

'I'd have sent her to prison,' Mrs. Leven said.

When Clarkson Fielding read Paulina's letter he began to think the thing was growing a little serious. The heroine herself could never have written such an epistle. There was clearly someone behind her. If anyone really wished to injure or annoy the Levens, Paulina, under effective guidance, could easily be made a very serviceable instrument. Fielding, it must be owned, did not greatly care what annoyance might fall upon the Levens. But he was deeply concerned that Gabrielle should not suffer any pain.

CHAPTER XXV.

'SIR, YOU AND I HAVE LOVED ; BUT THAT'S NOT IT.'

CLARKSON FIELDING began to persuade himself that there could be no harm in his calling on Gabrielle and telling her of the suspicion he had that somebody was backing-up Paulina. He did not care to speak to Major Leven on the subject ; and he disliked Mrs. Leven, and had an instinctive conviction that she disliked him. In truth, he was longing for any excuse to see Gabrielle before he left England, perhaps for ever. He thought there could be no harm in his doing this. It would, indeed, be the wisest possible precaution against any suspicion of his secret getting out. What could be better evidence of quiet friendship, and of friendship only, than to go and say a kindly farewell to one whose regard he desired to preserve ? If he were to go away in any more abrupt manner, surely it would be only putting a very provocation in suspicion's way. Heartily did he wish that he could go away as the brother does in

Richter's sad and beautiful story, who, finding that he loves only too well the girl his brother loves, sets out one morning blowing his familiar flute as if for an ordinary stroll, and is never heard of more. But Clarkson was concerned for Gabrielle and for his brother. It would doubtless make Gabrielle sad if she thought she had been the cause of his unhappiness and of his going away. 'She brought us together, Wilberforce and me,' he thought; 'she would be greatly hurt if she thought she were now the means of separating us.' He was deeply concerned for Wilberforce, knowing how his brother would be pained if he could think that Clarkson's heart was touched by Gabrielle. If he could contrive to get away, people would set down his going to the restlessness of an unmanageable and wandering nature, and it might never occur to any mind that there was any other cause. Wilberforce had told him lately that he had made up his mind to ask Gabrielle to marry him; and indeed had added that he would not see her again until he went for the purpose of asking her. Perhaps it is all settled before this, Clarkson thought. If so, the greater need that he should act in such a way as to make his secret a secret for ever.

While he was in this condition of mind, longing to see Gabrielle and yet afraid to see her, the question was decided by a few lines from Gabrielle herself. She asked him to come and see her as soon as he could. She had heard from his brother that Clarkson wished to leave England and that Wilberforce wished to keep him there, and in her impulsive way she fancied that it would be only right of her to endeavour to impress upon him the necessity of his acting as his brother wished. If Gabrielle had been given to self-examination, she would never have written that letter. Only of late had she ever thought of questioning the propriety of anything she felt impelled to do. If she had examined her own heart now, she would have seen how much of a selfish feeling there was in her when she set herself to write to Fielding. It was indeed selfishness of a very pardonable, human, harmless order; but it was the impulse of self all the same. She could not bear the idea of Clarkson going away. She felt as if she must be utterly lonely when he had gone. There was something peculiarly congenial in their natures. Each was impulsive, generous, uncalculating; neither cared for what the world or society said or thought. Each had, even if unconsciously, certain motives of action drawn from deeper and purer sources than those which the conventional proprieties and what are called the ways of the world supply. When she heard that Clarkson was going away.

she felt as if she must throw herself between him and such a resolve; as if she should have no friend on earth for whom she could really and deeply care when he had gone. It had never occurred to her to think that he felt anything more than friendship for her. There was nothing in his manner to tell of the lover or the sentimentalist. He was always frank and friendly; a little abrupt sometimes; he often showed an easy and kindly roughness like that of a brother to a sister. Gabrielle had not asked herself the question 'Is he in love with me?' No thought of the kind had ever found its way into her mind. He did not seem the man to be in love with any woman. But she knew now well enough, only too well, that she could have loved him if love had been thought of between them. She felt that if it had been he, and not Walter Taxal, who told her of love, she could not have held faithful to the memory of Albert Vanthorpe.

Besides—besides, she was very unhappy just now. A great illusion had gone for ever. How many parables, legends, fables, poems, essays, sermons, have been composed for the purpose of telling vain man that the least satisfactory thing on earth is to have his darling wish conceded? Never a man probably was any the wiser in advance for all the teaching. Never a woman surely was any the more willing to put up in patience with the denial of her darling wish. Gabrielle Vanthorpe had long had one darling wish; and now it is conceded; and no sermonising could have made her believe in advance the truth that is forcing itself on her unwilling mind. She has had the protectress of her youth given back to her. The friendship which, denied, made life so blank to her, is now hers again; and is she satisfied with it? She is beginning to find out that the Constance Leven whom she now knows is not in the least like the Constance Leven of her memory and her imagination.

Gabrielle had grown up under the care of Mrs. Leven. She was petted and fondled to her heart's content by her protectress, who was very fond of her as long as things went well with them. If she had married Albert Vanthorpe earlier, when his mother wished it, the love and petting would probably have continued always, and it may be that Gabrielle would never have discovered that she was only loved as any other pet is loved—a lapdog or a kitten. Mrs. Leven's nature was in its way about as complex a combination of the tyrant and the slave as that of any empress of the East whom history or fiction had painted. She was the slave of her own will, and the tyrant of all the alien wills that would oppose it.

While Gabrielle was in constant intercourse with her, the girl never saw anything of this. Mrs. Leven was to her simply as the mother who must always be right in whatever she does. But the long separation had turned Gabrielle into a new kind of observer. It forced upon her a new point of view. The links of habit were burst; the witchery of old association was gone. The girl with whom devotion was an article of faith had grown into a woman, and into a woman lately beginning to question the goodness of even her own emotions and impulses. It is a risk for two parted friends, even the dearest and the least open to criticism, to come together after long separation. New habits have grown up in each meanwhile; new ways of thinking; new tastes. They look upon each other as one looks on some long unvisited scene of early youth. It is the same, no doubt; it must be—and yet surely that hill used to seem higher and grander; the grass used to be greener; the stream was brighter. Can that be really the lovers' walk that was such a path of poetic and romantic delight? Now it seems mean and swampy, and there are thistles growing in it here and there. So, perhaps, we are apt to look on the idealised friends of long ago. They stand the test sometimes; as the dear schoolboy spot does; and become all the dearer for it. But there are times when we find, not merely that the charm is not there, but that no charm could ever have been there if we had always had our senses about us. And this was the melancholy case of Gabrielle Vanthorpe when she found herself restored to the affection of her old protectress.

She resisted the growing conviction at first; but it was not very long to be resisted. She soon began to acknowledge to herself that she found Mrs. Leven narrow, hard, and egotistic. She saw more and more the woman who had been cold and cruel to her in the presence of Albert Vanthorpe's dead body, and less and less the ideal friend, the more than mother, of her earlier memories. There was something even worse than this; for Gabrielle began now to reconcile the woman of the Genoa scene with the former woman and to see that it was after all only one consistent individuality. Innumerable vague memories disregarded before came up now to tell her that Mrs. Leven was always the same—self-willed, tyrannical, in the strictest sense effeminate. Gabrielle recognised in her the strong clamorous will of effeminacy, and the feeble reason and conscience; the effeminate incapacity to put oneself in the place of another; the tendency to make a creed and a religion out of one's own likes and dislikes, one's whims and passions. Before

very many days had passed over their renewed friendship Gabrielle felt that she had lost her friend for ever. More than that, she knew that for her no such friend had ever been in existence.

Mrs. Leven made much of her, in the homely phrase; insisted on being called 'mother' by her—as if anyone ever with a title to such a name had need to insist on its being given. The renewed intimacy was very agreeable for the time to Mrs. Leven, who had begun to find her life rather dull, and had long yearned for a pet of some kind. But it was painfully evident to Gabrielle that their ways of thinking and acting were not the same, and that some time there must come a collision of will or judgment or conscience; and then all would be in the dust again. It was evident that Mrs. Leven regarded Gabrielle as bound to her by eternal gratitude for having been taken back into favour. Indeed, much of Mrs. Leven's enjoyment in the reconciliation came from the satisfaction and complacency with which it enabled her to regard herself. She admired her own magnanimity very much. She was flattered by Gabrielle's submission thus far. It did not occur to her to doubt for a moment that she had acquired the absolute right to dispose of Gabrielle's life as might seem good to her. No one could be kinder than Mrs. Leven to those who would allow themselves to be ruled in all things by her as Capulet would have his daughter.

So Gabrielle wrote to Clarkson. His hand trembled as he took the letter. He smiled rather grimly at his own weakness. It was a short note, simply asking him to come and see her, as she had something to say to him. He had often received such notes before from her. He might have compared this with any of its predecessors if he had felt inclined, for he had kept them all safely stored. But it seemed to him that there was something peculiarly friendly and familiar in these few words; a sort of sisterly imperiousness. 'It is all over; it is done,' he leaped to the conclusion at once. 'She feels already as if she were my sister; she has promised to marry Wilberforce.' Then a great wave of disappointed love and of wild jealousy swept for a moment across the poor young man's heart. A positive cry broke from his lips; the cry of a pain that knows it will from that moment have to be still for ever. 'Why did I ever see her? Why did I ever come near him again? Why did she bring us together? Why is he so good and kind that I can't even hate him? He can never love her as I do; he can

never appreciate her as I do. She can never be to him what she might have been to me.'

He was in the old room in Bolingbroke Place. He had gone again into a sort of hiding there under pretence of putting together his papers and things before going away. He sat down and leaned his hand upon his chin and gave himself up to moody absorption for a full hour. He let the wave of passion and regret break quite over him unresisting. Then he got up and said to himself that now he could go and see her. A pang went through him as he stood on the doorstep and thought of the day when he opened that door for her and saw her for the first time. 'After this day I shall never see her again!' Never again—the immemorial syllables of despair.

When he saw her in her house she was apparently under the influence of some embarrassment or constraint. He thought it was easy to understand the reason why. 'My future sister-in-law,' he thought, 'finds the new position a little embarrassing at first.' He put on the most unconstrained and friendly air he could adopt. He seemed to her very cheerful and easy. He might have been a little more sorry to leave his friends, she thought; but of course man's instinct is for adventure and occupation and unrest. Gabrielle did not say at once why she had sent for him; and Clarkson talked a little about Paulina, and told of his suspicion about some unseen hand guiding that energetic creature's somewhat unskilled pen. Gabrielle did not follow all this with deep interest. She had taken the Paulina scandal very composedly; she could not be brought to see that any disgrace whatever fell upon the Levens or upon herself because Mrs. Leven's son had married a coarse and ungovernable woman. She was sorry, for the sake of womanhood, that Paulina should have made such an unseemly exhibition; but for herself she felt in no way abashed or alarmed. Gabrielle still thought they had all been a little too hard on the unfortunate Paulina. She had a firm conviction yet that she could have managed Paulina a great deal better than that. If they would only allow her, she would try what she could do even now. She hardly therefore followed the meaning of what Clarkson was trying to impress on her about Paulina. Her mind, indeed, was on other things.

'Do you know why I wrote and asked you to come here?' she broke in suddenly.

No, he didn't know, he said.

'I wrote to you because I thought it would please your brother.'

'Ah, yes,' Clarkson thought; 'I knew as much as that. It is all settled. I am talking to my sister-in-law that is to be.' He made some unmeaning answer.

'Your brother doesn't like your leaving England.'

'I know,' Clarkson said doggedly.

'Then why not gratify him and stay here? It was I who brought you together—don't you remember?'

Oh, yes; he had not forgotten that.

'And so I claim a sort of right to keep you together, if I can, Mr. Fielding.'

'You are very kind, but——' He shook his head.

'But I don't see why you must leave us. Your brother so wishes you to stay, and you seem to me to have travelled enough. It is time for you to settle down, Mr. Fielding, I think.'

'Settle down to what?'

'Well, to some kind of regular life. A man can't be always travelling aimlessly about the world, can he? All that ought to be only a preparation for some sort of career, I think. It can hardly be a career in itself, can it?'

'If one can do no better——'

'But you can do better. I feel sure you can—we all know you can.'

'Who are "we"? ' Fielding could not help asking.

'We? Who are we? Everyone who knows you—your brother——'

'Ah, yes; but Wilberforce is very partial.'

'I don't know; he has great judgment and good sense. Once you would have thought he was partial the other way. Don't you remember what trouble I had to prevail on you to go near him at all? Why, I had to adopt an audacious stratagem to bring you together.'

'I remember all that—I couldn't well forget it. I owe it to you altogether that Wilberforce and I have become friends and brothers again; I oughtn't to say "again," indeed, for we never were friends and brothers before. Now, I think he is the best fellow that ever lived——'

'Indeed he is,' Gabrielle said with emphasis.

'Yes; even you can't say a word more in his praise than I shall say, Mrs. Vanthorpe. Well, I owe all that to you; I should have lived and died under a false impression about my brother if it were not for you.'

'Oh, no,' said Gabrielle, blushing slightly at his earnestness; 'you and he would have found each other out in some way, you may be sure. You would never have been kept apart all your

lives for the mere want of someone to bring you together. Heaven is not so dependent upon any of us to bring about its ends. But I am glad it was my good fortune to be the medium in this case, Mr. Fielding; I freely confess that.'

'You are always doing good,' he said.

Gabrielle was thinking of instances in which she did not seem to have done good for all her trying.

'Oh no, Mr. Fielding; very much the reverse sometimes, I am afraid. I try to do good; but I rush into things in an impulsive way, and I find that I make sad mistakes. I wish I were not so impulsive: I wish I could restrain myself and not follow out every impulse the moment it begins to drive me on. I am afraid I have made enemies.'

Fielding smiled.

'Come,' he said, 'that is impossible. I can't imagine anybody being an enemy of yours.'

'Does that mean that I am not worth anybody's enmity, Mr. Fielding? If so, I don't take it as a compliment at all. I haven't forgotten also what Sir Oliver says about people who have no enemies—don't you remember—in the "School for Scandal"?''

'No, I don't mean that,' said Fielding composedly; 'although I never much believed in Sir Oliver's saying, all the same. I don't much believe in enemies; I don't think anyone makes enemies who acts for the best and goes straight on.'

'But now about your going away and ranging the world all over again,' she asked, anxious to turn the talk away from herself. 'I really do want to argue this point with you. You say you owe me something—and you do owe me at least some goodwill. Come then, I will release you from the obligation if you will only talk this over with me like a rational being. Why do you want to leave England?'

'Why should I stay in England?'

'Ah, that is not talking like a rational being; that is only asking a question. Still, I'll try to answer it. Because you ought to have some calling in England; because it is your country; England is the place where you ought to live and do what work you can. You ought to have travelled to educate yourself for England. Your friends all wish you to stay here; your brother wishes it; we all wish it.'

'Do you wish it—yourself?'

'Do I wish it? Of course I do. If you were my brother I should beg of you to stay. At least you must have some reason for not staying; you can tell me that.'

'I have a reason.' He stood up, and leaned with his back to the chimney-piece.

'Oh, you have a reason? Well, I am glad! What is it, Mr. Fielding?'

He wondered to see how clear and unsuspicious her eyes looked. 'If I should tell her now!' he thought.

'Surely you may tell me what it is,' she said in kindly, gentle tones. 'Is it that you are poor? Is it that you are proud? Is it that you don't like to be dependent on your brother? He tells me that you are not dependent on him—he says that the money he holds for you is not his; that it is yours. But that is a matter of no consequence; you can easily find a career in England. What is your reason for going away?'

'Well,' he said with hesitation, 'things will not be always the same here——'

'No, of course not. Who supposes they would? What has that to do with it?—they won't be always the same anywhere else.'

'Wilberforce will get married.'

'Yes; I suppose so. Why should you go away because of that?'

'Oh, don't you know?' he cried, losing fast all the patience and self-control he had kept so long.

'No, Mr. Fielding; how should I know?'

'You might guess, I think,' he said with a certain bitterness in his tone.

'Might I? then I should like to guess, for I don't wish to seem stupid. It surely cannot be because if your brother were married you think he would have less affection to spare for you? I don't believe that can be the reason; that wouldn't seem like you, Mr. Fielding.'

'No,' he said; 'it isn't that.'

'I thought so: I am glad of it. Then tell me; for I don't think I could guess.'

'She really does not know,' Fielding said to himself, and the bare conviction sent a rush of blood to his face. 'She has no idea of anything of the kind. Wilberforce has not yet spoken to her.'

'I don't understand you,' she said. 'I begin to understand you less and less as we go on, Mr. Fielding. Is there any mystery in all this? Why can you not tell me in plain words—or why do you excite my curiosity if the thing is not to be told?'

She looked so earnest and so kindly that the young man's barrier of self-composure melted completely away.

'Well, then, I will tell you,' he exclaimed; 'I was determined not to speak, but I can't help it. I heard you were going to be married——'

She did not at first see the meaning of his words, so much was she surprised by the thought that there should have been any talk about her being married. She felt herself growing hot and confused. She took it good-humouredly, however. .

'I never heard of it before, Mr. Fielding, I can assure you, and I am not going to be married. But I don't see why in any case——' and then looking up and seeing the revelation in his face she stopped short in such utter confusion that it would have been a positive relief to her if she had fainted, or the floor had given way, or the sky fallen, or anything happened to save her from saying more or seeming to leave more unsaid. The full meaning of his words suddenly came on her, and she kn. of his love.

'You know it all now,' Fielding said.

'Oh, stop!' she begged.

'It's too late now to stop. Yes, you know it all now, Mrs. Vanthorpe. I was in love with you, that's all; I am in love with you, that's all. I have a right to be in love with you if I like; and I can't help it whether I like it or not, or whether I have a right. I thought you might have guessed this before; I thought women always knew of such things.'

'I didn't know it,' said Gabrielle, and she tried to say something more, and did not succeed in getting any words articulately spoken. She sat down and put her hands to her face and fairly burst into tears. She could not help herself, she had no other way of giving a voice to her feelings. She had long borne almost unknowingly too hard a strain. She had fought earnestly against a growing love which seemed to her, as things then were, to be unwomanly and a shame—and now all at once she knew that he loved her. The joy was mingled with fear; she foresaw much difficulty and much reproach; and it seemed like impiety and ingratitude to renounce in this way the memory of Albert. Yet life had lately been growing barren and full of disappointment, and all her hopes were turning out to be only shining bubbles at the best, and she was unhappy and was not making others happy, and she felt that now she would go to the end of the world with Fielding if he asked her, and she longed to go and be away at once from question and reproach and the sneers of cold friends and the misconstruction of some and the pity of others—and in short all her little world had shattered and fallen asunder, and

a new, strange world was coming up in its place, and this was too much for her, and she could only sit and sob. Fielding started in alarm and moved towards her in fear that she was about to faint, and in his sudden movement his arm struck against the portrait of Albert Vanthorpe, and it fell to the floor.

Gabrielle motioned with one hand for Fielding not to approach her. She could not speak to him just yet. She could not listen to anything he could say. She did not venture to look up; she only still-sat and sobbed.

Fielding fell back bewildered. He expected surprise and anger, he expected perhaps some keen and hasty words, or he might have looked for a reproof of icy coldness; but he never dreamed of such a reception for his words as this. The one thing that had never seemed to him to come within the limits of possible conjecture was her caring about him. He did not think of it now; her tears he supposed were only evidence of her impassioned resentment of a supposed offence.

'Have I offended you so much, Mrs. Vanthorpe?' he asked very humbly. 'I never meant to do that; I did not mean to say what I have said two moments ago, but I couldn't help saying it. But pray, pray don't be offended, do forgive me. Oh, do but think of it, I am the sufferer and not you. Shall I go away?'

Still keeping her handkerchief to her eyes with one hand, she held out the other towards him. He touched it respectfully, assuming that it was offered in token of forgiveness. Suddenly she looked up at him and said in her characteristic and impulsive way:

'Are you sure of this?'

'Sure of what?' the bewildered young man asked.

'Sure of what you have told me? Is it certain, and deep? Do you know yourself? Is it sure to last?'

'You mean my love for you? It has lasted since I first knew you; since I first saw you, I think. It will last all my time, Mrs. Vanthorpe.' He spoke with that simple earnestness which was a part of his nature and which made his quiet words stronger than the oaths of other men.

'I wish I were not so foolish,' she said, rising from her chair. 'But this is such a strange sensation; I don't know what to say or what to think even. What shall I say, Mr. Fielding?'

'Say that you forgive me,' he answered, 'and that you will sometimes think of me perhaps.' He had even yet no better hope.

'But must you still go away?'

'You would not have me stay, after this?'

'Oh, yes, I would.'

'Mrs. Vanthorpe'—he broke into a great cry of surprise—
'it can't be—it cannot be; you do not care about me—about me?'

'Oh, yes,' she answered quietly; 'I have cared for you this long time. But I never thought you cared about me.' She turned away towards the windows as she spoke; she was not able to look him in the face; perhaps she feared that her words might provoke some passionate demonstration.

At that moment she heard the tread of a horse's feet on the gravel beneath, and she saw that Sir Wilberforce was alighting at her door.

'Oh, your brother!' she exclaimed, turning to Fielding with an expression of something like alarm. 'I could not see him at this moment—I could not see anyone. Will you see him?'

'I can't see him,' Fielding said. 'Do you know what he has come for?'

'No—how should I know?'

'He has come to ask you to marry him. I know he has. He told me his secret; he trusted it to me; he told me of it again and again. He will think I have been a traitor to him—I cannot see him, Mrs. Vanthorpe!'

Gabrielle turned cold with surprise and pain. She could not understand Fielding's natural impulse of self-reproach and of compassion at the mention of his brother's name. She did not give herself time to understand it. She only knew that he seemed to speak as if there were some mystery and shame about their love to be hidden away from the outer world. A quick revulsion of feeling took place within her. Even in the very moment of her sudden love-confession, she had felt that there was something of a fall to her pride in having to make it. She had felt her heart pierced as with a sudden wound when she saw Albert Vanthorpe's picture fall. But she was ready to give up everything for her love; she would have braved any amount of misconstruction and anger and humiliation for him—and now he seemed as if he were afraid or ashamed to look his brother in the face, and tell him that he loved her. To make it all the more bitter, he had called her 'Mrs. Vanthorpe.'

'This is a little too like a French comedy for my taste,' said Gabrielle, speaking with forced composure. 'I can't hide you behind the curtains, Mr. Fielding; and if you don't wish to meet your brother, you must make your escape your own way.'

I shall see Sir Wilberforce ; but I shall not betray your confidence. We have not committed ourselves very far, either you or I ; and the little that has been said shall count as unsaid.'

Fielding was approaching her ; but she waved him off with scornful and imperious gesture.

'Show Sir Wilberforce in,' she said to the servant, who entered the room that moment. 'Or stay, Rose ; help me first to put my husband's picture into its place ; it has fallen ; I must have it fixed there more firmly. Good morning, Mr. Fielding ; or I suppose it must be good-bye if you are really resolved on leaving England. This way, Rose, if you please ; just here.'

Fielding made one step towards her ; but she had turned her back upon him. It was her evident resolve to keep her maid in the room until he had gone. He could not attempt a word of explanation with Gabrielle. He understood a fury in her words, but he did not yet clearly understand her meaning. He had gone through too many confusing sensations during the last few moments to be able to get his wits about him soon again. Everything had turned out as surprisingly unlike what he had looked for, as if he were living out in actual experience the incoherent incidents of a dream. He had entered the house with the purpose of saying good-bye for ever to the woman he loved, and as he believed loved hopelessly ; he had resolved to keep his secret firm and fast ; he had betrayed himself in a moment ; the next moment he heard Gabrielle tell him from her own lips that she loved him and that he must not go ; and then in a moment again, he found himself dismissed with anger and contempt : dismissed, and not allowed and not able to say one word for himself.

An instant or two he stood irresolute, and then—there was nothing else for it—he left the room and left the house, finding in all his bewilderment a sense of relief in the fact that he was able to make his painful and ignominious escape without meeting his brother as he went. Suddenly, with the rush as of a wind, a great feeling of joy came over him. 'She said she loved me ; I heard her say it ; nothing on earth can alter that !'

CHAPTER XXVI.

'GABRIELLE.'

Mrs. LEVEN was in a specially anxious mood when she went to see Gabrielle on the day of Sir Wilberforce's visit and of his brother's abrupt dismissal. The two brothers had been early visitors that day, and Mrs. Leven arrived long after both had gone. She had heard from Major Leven something about Sir Wilberforce's views with regard to Gabrielle. Indeed, anyone might have guessed from the frequency of his visits to Gabrielle what his views were. There was not much of the crafty diplomatist about Wilberforce, and his attentions to Gabrielle had become so marked of late that anybody but Gabrielle herself must have understood their significance. She had not understood it, or thought anything about it. To her he seemed simply a kind goodhearted friend who might almost have been her father. But to Mrs. Leven he seemed still a sort of young man; and of course she assumed that he was certain to marry some time or other. Therefore she had a strong conviction that before long he would be found opening his mind to Gabrielle, and she was anxious to anticipate him if she could. She wanted Gabrielle to know at once that if Sir Wilberforce should ask her to marry him, she, Mrs. Leven, Gabrielle's protectress, friend, and mother, was of opinion the offer should be accepted. Mrs. Leven thought the position, the name, the respectability of character, the British strength of Sir Wilberforce would be the best shelter for Gabrielle's impulsive life.

Mrs. Leven had forgotten her elder son in her love for the more dutiful younger. She was now like to forget Albert in the renewed affection she had for Albert's widow. She often argued gently with Gabrielle on the unwisdom of keeping up the memorial chamber to Albert's name, and pointed out that she herself in all her grief, whereof the grief of forty thousand widows could not make up the sum, had never maintained any such monument. She was for Gabrielle now going freely out to meet the world, and bringing the world as much as possible to her. After a while she began to go further yet, and to hint to Gabrielle that it was absurd and impossible to continue in her resolution not to get married again. In truth Mrs. Leven had now set her heart on the marriage of Gabrielle to Sir Wilberforce Fielding. He was a Baronet;

he was very rich; and as he was not a young man he could not be supposed to come into any sort of comparison with the dead Albert. Everyone would know that Gabrielle did not marry him for love; and there would be no slight to the memory of Mrs. Leven's son. By refusing Walter Taxal, who was young and good-looking, and the son of a peer, Gabrielle had sufficiently acknowledged what was due to the memory of Albert Vanthorpe. Mrs. Leven therefore thought that all the proprieties justified her in hoping to see her daughter, as she now once more called her, converted from Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe into Lady Fielding.

'Gabrielle, my love, you look quite pale. You seem to me to be very unwell. What is the matter, dearest child?'

Mrs. Leven sat beside Gabrielle on a sofa, and drew the girl towards her, and put her arm round her neck, and petted her as in the old days. But Gabrielle could not warm, somehow, with the old affection. She bore the petting patiently; she did not delight in it.

'I am very well, dear,' Gabrielle said. 'Nothing ever happens to me; I am shockingly uninteresting; I never feel ill.'

'Your life is too lonely, dearest. You can't live this way always. Your friends all say so. You may well believe that my advice on such a subject is sincere.'

'On what subject, dear?' Gabrielle asked rather languidly. She had not been following very clearly what Mrs. Leven was saying with a sort of mystical earnestness.

'Your kind of life, dear girl. It is too lonely for one so young. We all feel it. Major Leven thinks so; and so does Sir Wilberforce Fielding.'

Gabrielle started so palpably at the mention of this name that the thrill passed through Mrs. Leven too; and Mrs. Leven at once assumed that something had happened.

'You start at his name, my Gabrielle. Has Sir Wilberforce been here lately?'

'He was here this morning,' Gabrielle said, in the tone of one from whom a painful confession is extorted. 'He has not gone very long.'

'Oh!' Then there was a moment's pause. The silence satisfied Mrs. Leven that something had come of the visit.

'Gabrielle, my love, am I right in supposing that Sir Wilberforce came to-day with a particular purpose? There is no breach of confidence, darling; I speak with you as if I were your mother. No one could object to your telling me.'

'There is no secret about it, I suppose,' Gabrielle said, 'to you at least. Sir Wilberforce has been very kind and good; I am sure I am greatly obliged, or I ought to be.'

'Yes, dearest? well?'

'Oh, you can guess, dear,' Gabriello said wearily. 'You have guessed already, I am sure. Sir Wilberforce asked me to marry him.'

There was another pause. Gabriello apparently was not going to say any more on the subject.

'Well, dearest?'

'Well, Mrs. Leven, that is the whole story.'

'Gabrielle, how can you speak to me coldly as "Mrs. Leven"? We have forgotten all our old anger——'

'I never felt any anger to you,' said Gabrielle truly.

'You are a sweet girl; so sweet and good that you could forgive even a little unreasoning anger in one of a warmer temper. But I want to hear more from you about this. Sir Wilberforce asked you to be his wife. What did you say, dearest?'

'What could I say? I told him it was impossible.'

'Yes? Did he accept that answer?'

'He did. What else could he do? It was very kind of him, and all that, I suppose; but he might have known.'

'But, dearest Gabrielle, you can't remain all your life in this lonely way. It is impossible, my dear child. You are too young and too pretty. I really don't think you could do better than to marry Sir Wilberforce. I don't indeed. Perhaps, however, he does not take your answer as quite final? Nineteen may-says make one grant, it used to be said in my younger days.'

'They will never make a grant in my case. Sir Wilberforce knows that perfectly well. He is too kind and good to say any more to me about it, when he knows how I feel.'

'You told him you were resolved never to marry again? He wouldn't much mind that, Gabriello. Young women always say such things as that; and believe them too. I was convinced at one time I never would marry again.'

'I told him that my present resolve was not to marry again. But I told him also that I never could feel to him as I should feel to a man I could marry. I don't care about him in that way at all.'

'He is not young,' Mrs. Leven said meditatively; 'but he is not old, Gabrielle; and often there is more congeniality in a man of that age. You have grown to be a grave sort of girl, Gabrielle; you would not find him too old in manner, I fancy.'

‘It is not that. I like him very much; I like him as a friend all the better because he isn’t young; but I never could like him to marry him.’

‘But Walter Taxal is young; and you didn’t like him well enough to marry him.’

Gabrielle had not supposed that Mrs. Leven knew anything about Walter Taxal’s love-making. But she expressed no wonder.

‘I like Walter Taxal very much; but not in that way. I could not marry him. But I don’t want to marry any one.’

‘Gabrielle,’ Mrs. Leven said suddenly, ‘did Sir Wilberforce ask you if there was anyone you preferred to him?’

‘He did not ask me anything of the kind. If he had, I would not have answered him. But he is far too courteous and gentle to ask such a question.’

‘There is such a person!’ Mrs. Leven made up her mind at once; and in a moment it was borne in upon her that some slight to the memory of Albert Vanthorpe was intended.

‘How unlike Sir Wilberforce is to his brother!’ she said.

‘Very unlike,’ Gabrielle said.

‘You don’t like the brother, I am sure, Gabrielle?’

‘Oh, yes; I like him very much.’

‘But don’t people say strange things about him?’

‘They do, very strange things; and yet they are quite true. They say that he is very generous and truthful and kind; and that he does not care in the least for money or society or getting on in life, and that he hasn’t anything mean in him—and other strange things like that.’

‘I didn’t mean exactly that. A man is often very free of his money, and careless about money; and young men often fancy they don’t care about getting on in life—we know all that sort of thing well enough. But a man may be very wild and bad for all that.’

‘I never heard anyone say anything bad about Mr. Fielding,’ said Gabrielle, withdrawing herself gently and almost imperceptibly from Mrs. Leven’s closer embrace.

‘Oh, yes, Gabrielle dearest, you must surely have heard things said of him. He was very wild, and he ran away from his father’s house early in life; and I believe he broke his father’s heart. He was a friend of my unfortunate son Philip; and I have no doubt he was just such another. I sometimes even think he looks like him—as Philip would look now if he were living. Do you know that, much as I respect Sir

Wilberforce, I cannot help feeling a sort of shudder pass through me when I see his brother here under my Albert's roof !'

Under my Albert's roof ! Gabrielle felt an angry glow rise to her face at the words. But she did not give any expression to her thoughts. She would not enter into any controversy with Mrs. Leven. She had seldom much control over her resolves and her impulses ; but she could command her words and her temper. No temptation could draw her into any dispute with Albert Vanthorpe's mother. Mrs. Leven now again often thought Gabrielle docile and malleable when she was only patient and silent.

But Gabrielle's mind was made up. 'I shall never be free,' she thought, 'as long as I live in this house and live on poor Albert's money. I am sold into servitude so long as I live in this sort of way. I have no freedom ; at any moment I am liable to be asked to give account of whom I admit into Albert Vanthorpe's house, and what use I make of his money. I don't want the house or the money ; and I don't know how to make any really good use of money. I have enough of my own to live on, and I want no more. I hate this servitude ; I'll not endure it ; I will be free !'

Mrs. Leven returned home much distressed in mind. Gabrielle had determined not to marry Sir Wilberforce, and it was much to be feared had been taken by the handsome and good-for-nothing brother, whom Mrs. Leven had from the first disliked and distrusted. The aggrieved lady felt almost in a mood to proclaim herself an infidel, seeing how things were turning out.

The moment Mrs. Leven had gone, Gabrielle hurried to take counsel of Lady Honeybell. She plunged into the matter abruptly.

'Lady Honeybell, how can I get rid of money ?'

'Get rid of money, my dear ? eh, but that's rather an odd question. I never heard of anyone having the slightest difficulty about getting rid of it, except, perhaps the man in the story about the bottle imp—what was it ?'

'But I don't mean getting rid of it by spending or wasting it. I want it to do some good to somebody. I only want to be rid of it myself. I have money that I don't intend to keep any longer. I hate the thought of having it. What am I to do with it ?'

'You are serious in this ?'

'Oh yes, Lady Honeybell, quite serious.'

'Tell me all about it ; begin at the beginning.'

Nothing could be more friendly and reassuring than Lady

Honeybell's way. It showed Gabrielle that the good woman was prepared to treat her not as a child or an idiot, and to enter into the conversation on the basis of an admission that there might be possessions dearer than money. Gabrielle told her the whole story, except, of course, what concerned the two Fieldings. Lady Honeybell listened in silence until the tale had evidently come to an end. Perhaps she was expecting to hear something more.

'Why don't you ask Mrs. Leven to take her son's property off your hands, since you don't like the trouble of it?'

'She wouldn't take it, Lady Honeybell. She is too proud; and she has money of her own, and she is not a woman to grasp at money.'

'Then why don't you keep it yourself, and make the best use you can of it, since she doesn't think herself wronged by your having it?'

'Because I want to be free. I want to feel that I can do as I think right without having it made a reproach to me by poor Albert's mother that I am living on his money.'

'In plain words, you want to do something that you think she will not like.'

'I want to be free,' said Gabrielle firmly. 'Free to do what I think right.'

'Yes, yes,' Lady Honeybell said, good-humouredly. 'We mean the same thing, no doubt. He is as proud as yourself, I suppose? Well, you needn't blush, and I don't ask you to tell me any secrets; but of course, my dear young woman, I can see that there is a *he* in the business, and that he is somebody Mrs. Leven doesn't much like, and that he is a man of spirit who does not want to take a wife with a burden of money.'

'Lady Honeybell, I have never spoken to any man about this; nor to any woman either, but yourself.'

'No, no; but there is a man all the same. Well, I think on the whole you are right; and I respect your way of looking at the matter. I can promise you that I will think it over, and I'll ask my husband - not mentioning your name, of course. You must be prepared for everyone thinking you a fool; but I suppose you don't care about that.'

'Oh no, Lady Honeybell, not in the least.'

'Lady Honeybell smiled at the quiet self-containment of the reply.

'But you won't be quite poor, I suppose, even after this sacrifice? Poverty's an awful thing, I fancy, for all that they say in the story-books.'

'I shall have enough to live on,' Gabrielle said. 'I shall have what I lived on before I became poor Albert's widow. I was always very happy then, Lady Honeybell. There are people who do not care about money, and I am one of them. I had an idea at one time that I might do a great deal of good somehow, and make many people happy; but I don't think I made much of a success of it, and I am not equal to the responsibility.'

'You are too young,' Lady Honeybell said, nodding her head. 'Too young, and that's the truth of it, to live alone, and make up plans for the good of your fellow-creatures. But I'll tell you what you can do; I thought it from the first time I saw you, and I think it more than ever now.'

'Yes, Lady Honeybell, what is that?'

'You can make one man happy. There's your mission for you, Gabrielle, my dear. I call you by your name, for I like you. I am only afraid it won't be the man that I would name if I had the chance. I wish I had a son, and that you would marry him.'

Gabrielle neither denied nor admitted the truth of Lady Honeybell's conjecture. She would have scorned the meanness that denies the purpose which one secretly cherishes, merely because it is only a purpose, and may never have a chance of being realised. Lady Honeybell promised to help her all she could to come to some wise disposal of poor Albert's property. Lady Honeybell felt her estimate of Gabrielle much enhanced by what she heard. 'Eh, true enough, money isn't everything,' she said to herself. Her thoughts went back to a time long before she had any idea of being the wife of the Earl of Honeybell, and to a young man, with whom she had some romantic passages, when all the world was young, and he and she were the very youngest of all. She would gladly have married him, if only her people would listen to the doctrine that money is not everything. An excellent man, truly, was Lord Honeybell, although he took little interest in his wife's occupations and amusements; but Lady Honeybell knew now by experience that money is not all—not nearly all, perhaps, if one would only think it.

It was with a bursting heart that Gabrielle returned to the home which she meant to be hers no longer. Her mind was made up; the die was cast. Nothing on earth should induce her to live in that house and on the money of Albert Vanthorpe. She thought with humiliation of the sort of servitude which seemed to be morally imposed upon her by the possession of money which she had never coveted. She longed to feel herself

free again. But as she passed up the stairs of the house which had been found for her and fitted up so lovingly for her by tender hands, she could not help feeling touched by the thought that she had to sever herself from the memories, or at least from the monuments, of that deep disinterested affection. A new life was all before her; for the third time in her short days, she was to begin all over again. The thought made every step she set on the stairs of her present home seem like a farewell. She spoke to no one, but went slowly to the familiar room where she had seen Fielding that morning; where she had spoken with Wilberforce later still. As she reached its threshold she was thinking of this and other memorable interviews she had had in the same room, with the portrait of Albert Vanthorpe looking on. 'Something strange is always happening to me in this room,' she thought. 'Soon I shall not see it any more. There are some memories of it that I shall always love.'

The dusk was gathering, and the room was dim. The lamps were not yet lighted; she could scarcely discern objects around. As she approached the chimney-piece she could see that the picture of Albert Vanthorpe was in its place. It looked now a more dark slab against the dusk. Her eyes were attracted by it and were fixed upon it; there was something ominous and reproachful about its presence, and about the manner in which it had fixed her attention the moment she entered the room.

'Gabrielle!' The word came in a low, thrilling tone from somewhere between her and the picture. She stood still, but she did not scream. 'Gabrielle!' And then she saw a figure rise from the ground—it almost seemed as if it might have come out of the ground before her—and she was aware of the presence of Clarkson Fielding.

'Oh, how did you come here?' she asked breathlessly.

'I came to see you; I knew you would return soon. I stole in here like a thief in the night, and lay on the hearth until I heard you come in. I wanted to see you alone, Gabrielle.'

'But if anyone had come in and seen you?' she said, hardly knowing what she was saying, and only feeling sure that her heart was beating loudly.

'I didn't care; I must see you; and I lay on the hearth in token of humiliation; for I must have offended you in some way to-day. There, you are tired, or I have frightened you. Sit here, no, here, on the sofa, and I will lie at your feet.'

His manner of submissive domination overmastered her.

She sat on the sofa as he bade her ; and he actually threw himself on the ground at her feet. He took her hand, and she did not resist. There was a moment of silence.

‘ You have forgiven me ? ’ he said, turning his head round towards her ; ‘ and you will tell me why you were angry with me to-day, Gabrielle ? ’

‘ Because I humbled myself as no woman ought to do, and you seemed ashamed to meet your brother’s eyes. What wrong had I done to your brother ? what had I to be ashamed of ? ’

‘ Oh, no, not you, but I : at least, I felt so for the moment. Look here, Gabrielle, listen. He told me again and again how fond he was of you ; he told me he was going to ask you to marry him. You know how good, and kind, and brotherly—more than brotherly—he has been to me. How could I help feeling afraid to look him in the face, and confess that I had come between him and his hopes ? If I had ever known, or ever thought or suspected, or anything—but how could I suspect ? How could I think a woman like you could care about a ne’er-do-well like me ? Why, I remember once saying that if you would only have the goodness to trample on me, I should be only too happy. Good heavens ! how could I fancy that you would care about me ? I should never have believed it, if you had not told me yourself.’

‘ I don’t know why I told you,’ Gabrielle said ; ‘ but I could not help it then, and I felt that it was right at the time. Why should I allow you to go away from England, if—if that was all ? ’

‘ Ay, why indeed, why indeed ? But I never dreamed of such a thing, Gabrielle. I thought you would very likely marry my brother ; and, much as I love Wilberforce now, I could not stay and see that. Can you wonder if I was afraid to meet him ? I have taken you from him ; he may even think I was treacherous to him, and deceived him. You can understand this, Gabrielle, Gabrielle ? ’ He seemed to take a delight in the mere repeating of her name. ‘ You forgive me, Gabrielle ? ’

‘ Yes,’ she said. ‘ I felt bitter at the moment. I think I was angry with myself more than with you ; but I understand now better, and I know it must be a trying thing to you to have to meet your brother. But you will tell him all the truth, just as it is ; and he will believe you. He is so loyal and true himself.’

‘ And you do care for me, Gabrielle ? ’ He sank his voice into a wonderful softness of tone. ‘ You love me ? ’

‘Oh yes, I said that before. Nothing can change that.’ She felt him press her hand to his lips. There was a moment’s silence. She was glad that the dusk was deepening, so that even her lover could not see her face.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘you must go. You must leave me, for this time. We can see each other soon again; very soon. I will write. Is not that the best way? But this is all so strange now, everything in the world seems changed. You must give me time to collect my senses. You will go—my friend?’

She did not know yet by what name to call him. It was all too new and sudden for her to venture on a tenderer word. But her tremulous voice gave an unspeakable tenderness to the word; and he was satisfied.

‘Yes; I will go,’ he said. ‘I will steal out as I stole in. I should not like this first time to leave you as a common visitor does. I came like a lover, and I will go away like a lover; and so good-bye, Gabrielle.’ He drew her down towards him, as he still reclined on the floor at her feet; and she felt his lips press hers. And then he leaped lightly to his feet, and vanished, as it were, in the dusk. He had come as a lover in a sort of romantic secrecy; and he had gone as a lover should go. Gabrielle sat in the soft gloom of the evening, and felt that if ’twere now to die ’twere now to be most happy. All her life before had seemed lonely and bare, a mere dull mistake, until this moment. ‘Is it possible,’ she thought, ‘that this can last; that happiness like this moment’s is not to be paid for by some misfortune?’ There came strangely across her mind the saying of some saint: ‘Truly the damned ones are miserable, for they cannot love.’

Then she rang for lights, and tried to look and feel like some commonplace person to whom nothing in particular has happened.

CHAPTER XXVII.

‘WHEN FALLS THE MODEST GLOAMING.’

THE two Scottish poets, Burns and Hogg, have dealt with the same text in the poem of each which sings of the love who is ‘but a lassie yet.’ The lover pictured by the Ettrick Shepherd is in very ecstasy of happiness, and in the highest mood of human confidence. Nothing can be less than sacred for him which has been touched, or praised, or looked on by his love ‘who’s but a lassie yet.’ The stream so glassy, the modest

gloaming, the birds that sing, the grass that grows green around the feet of the loved one, the very wind that kisses her, the flowery beds on which she treads—all come in for the poet's love and praise. How otherwise is it with Burns's disappointed hero! This lover has been hardly entreated by his love 'who's but a lassie yet.' He only thinks of letting her stand a year or two in the hope that she will not then be quite so saucy; he declares that no one can woo her; man can only buy her. He vows that the real joy of man is a drop o' the best o't—being for the moment in the mood of the author of the *Vaux de Vire*, who finds easy consolation in wine when the scornful girl rejects his petition for a kiss; and, finally, in a wild burst of cynicism, worthy of Villon himself, he goes off into an utterly irrelevant remark about a minister who made love to a fiddler's wife and could not preach for thinking of her charms.

Clarkson Fielding was in the full mood of the happy lover. But he was also in a condition of much distress for the unhappy one who might, for all he knew, be in such state as Burns has described. The one sole drawback to his happiness was his knowledge that the same event which filled him with joy must have dashed the hopes of his brother to the ground. He wrote to Wilberforce at once, a short frank letter of explanation, in which he told how the knowledge of his great happiness had come on him wholly by surprise, and how when Wilberforce talked of asking Gabrielle to marry him, 'it never occurred to my mind that she could possibly care for me.' 'I was determined not to say a word about it,' he wrote; 'I was going away for that reason alone, because I did not like to disturb your happiness by allowing you to know that I was unhappy. I was in love with her, Wilberforce, before you ever saw her, and I can't deny good fortune more than bad. What I thought was my case has come to be your case, and if I am happy I still can feel sorry that you are disappointed. Is it my fault if we have both set our hearts on the one woman, and my good fortune is your disappointment?' Wilberforce replied at once:

'My dear Clarkson, how could she help liking you better? You are young and good-looking; and I only wonder the thing never occurred to me before. I shall get over my disappointment, and be able to congratulate you both very soon, I hope. Tell her so from me, and wish her every happiness; and the same to you, Clarkson, from

'Your affectionate brother,

'WILBERFORCE.'

Fielding read these few direct and manly words with a certain sense of relief. 'He could not have loved her as I do; and he will get over it. I should not have got over it.' He said as much to Gabrielle.

'Oh, no,' she said, 'your brother is not by any means broken-hearted. He didn't even say he was—when I saw him. I think if he had known, he would have made an offer on your behalf as the next best thing. I have no scruples of conscience and no remorse on his account. I shall be very fond of him as a brother-in-law.'

'There is one thing that troubles me,' Fielding said, after a moment's pause; 'and only one thing in the world, now that we have reconciled our consciences about poor Wilberforce.'

'What is your trouble. Is it anything I can help you to get rid of?'

'Yes; it is all in your hands.'

'Ah, then it is done with,' she said. 'Tell me.'

'I find it hard to come at it. It's about money, and that sort of thing; and I hate even to mention the name of money to you just now. Well, it's this—I don't want a wife with money. I want you; but not your money. Come, now, I have got that out.'

'You mean the money that is not mine—that was given to me—that is the money you speak of?'

'Yes, that is it; I hate the idea, Gabrielle.'

'I knew you would think so; and I have already done as you would have me to do. I am coming to you free of encumbrance.' Then she told him what she had resolved on doing, and that she had been in counsel with Lady Honeybell, and that the only question now was how to turn poor Albert Vauthorpe's money to some good account whereby some human creatures should be the better for it.

'The dreams I used to have!' Gabrielle said. 'The wonderful things I was to do for all manner of people! The life of lonely beneficence I was to lead! And this is how it all ends; I meet you and I fall in love—first love, just like a school-girl!'

'You are not sorry, Gabrielle?'

'I never before was happy.'

Fielding was silent for a moment. He was filled with new admiration for her and with gratitude, because of the manner in which she had anticipated his inmost feelings with regard to poor Albert's money. 'True and noble heart!' he thought.

'Some of your friends will blame you greatly, Gabrielle.'

'Oh, yes; I know. I have thought of all that.'

'They will say all manner of hard things of me.'

'I suppose so; I shall not believe them.'

For Fielding could not help fearing that there would be persons found to make the worst of his wild life, in order to alarm Gabrielle, and make her think perhaps that she was venturing too much in trusting her happiness to him. His life had been a wild one in the strict sense, but not quite according to the conventional meaning of the word. It had been a life of bold and harmless wandering. It could not fairly be called an eccentric life; at least, it had not strayed far from the central principle which Fielding set up for himself. There was some practical philosophy in it. At a very early age Fielding had made up his mind, according to the phrase of a thoughtful writer of our time, as to what the world—the world of society—was worth to him. He found that it was worth—nothing; and he acted accordingly. He set himself absolutely free. But that he loved Gabrielle so much now he would never have thought of giving up his unhoused free condition. But it is the fault of the story-teller if the reader has not seen even from the very first that there was a depth of fresh and almost boyish yearning in the young man for the sweet and close companionship of some loving nature. He could not have loved Gabrielle if she had not been of his own turn of mind with regard to society, and the delight of getting on in the world. There really did seem a great deal that was alike in these two, this odd young man and odd young woman, who were not anxious about money and did not care what society said about anything. As the homely old saying would have put the thing, it would be a pity to spoil two houses with such a pair.

A measureless content had settled upon Fielding. His peculiar life had taught him one thing at least—he knew perfectly well what he liked and what he did not like, and not only what he liked and disliked to-day, but what he must like and dislike to-morrow. He knew that he must always love Gabrielle, and that her companionship would be worth all the world to him. He had not the faintest idea of his possibly changing to her or of her changing to him. He would pull himself together now, he said, and do something; and he meant just what he said. He had money enough to start with, and it was only a question of where Gabrielle would like to go, and what sort of life they had best lead. He had chafed a little, at first, at the thought of his being supposed to come in

for Albert Vanthorpe's money; but Gabrielle had settled all that, and he only wondered now that he did not know from the first that she would settle it. He felt perfectly happy and confident. The future looked as if it were steeped in sunshine; but the present was so sunny, too, that he did not long for it to hurry on even for the sake of the coming and dearer time. He was proud of his beautiful Gabrielle, and of her wild-falcon ways, which would stoop to no hand but his. If ever a lover, since love began on earth, was loved for himself alone, he surely thought he, Clarkson Fielding, was that happy man.

'I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I did till we loved!'

The sweet strong words of the poet often came up to the mind of Fielding, and might have come up to the mind of Gabrielle, too, if she had read Dr. Donne. What had life been before to either of them? What had it been all about? What had there been to live for till now? Gabrielle, in particular, looked back upon her past existence with wonder and compassion. This feeling of love was the one thing she had always wanted. She had missed it, not knowing what it was she missed. She was so happy now that she sometimes became sad for very happiness; sad through the fear that such a happiness could not last. The gods in the fable which Socrates invented for *Æsop* made pain and pleasure to spring from one head, so that man can hardly touch the one without coming into some contact with the other. Gabrielle was still romantic enough to fancy sometimes that she should like nothing better than for Fielding and herself to die together. She thought Byron's *Myrrha* a most enviable creature, to die thus gloriously with her lover, and see no more of the pettinesses and paltrinesses of life. The idea sometimes possessed her to an almost morbid degree. She dreaded any possibility of some influence coming between Fielding and her, and parting them. She shrank from the thought that one day she must grow old, and lose whatever charm of face and form she had, and not be lovely in his eyes, however she might be dear to his heart. Strange to say, love began to inspire Gabrielle, for the first time in her life, with something like self-consciousness and vanity. Truly it was a very harmless vanity; the immemorial fond desire of the girl to look beautiful in her lover's eyes. But it made a difference to Gabrielle. She found herself studying her face in the glass, and considering her features, and the arrangement of her hair, and wondering whether she looked better in this dress or the other, in this colour or in that; and sometimes beginning to

doubt whether she really had any good looks at all; and then reassuring herself with the conviction that Fielding loved her whether or not; and then again yielding to a growing belief that she must, on the whole, be rather good-looking than otherwise. All this time Fielding never once paid her a direct compliment. His love and his ways were compliment enough. He thought her beautiful, and he knew that she knew what he thought.

They met still, as he had put it, after the fashion of lovers. Every evening, as the dusk was coming on, Fielding was with her. Every evening, before the lamps were lighted, he went away. It was not fitting just yet that he should be much with her, or put on the ways of an accepted lover. So he still came to see her, as the young Spartan lovers came to visit their brides, in something like stealth and secrecy. They were very sweet, these soft evening hours, when the late summer's sunset slanted for a while through the branches of the trees around Gabrielle's little demesne, and the sound of London life was unheard in that darkling room, and the two were almost as much isolated from ordinary life at the time as Chateaubriand's forest-lovers. The latest carriages had not yet left the Park. The loungers were still there, many groups, many solitary figures; some lounging there because they had nothing else to do, for life came easily to them; others because they had scarcely any other place to go to, life being hard upon them. Fashion and wealth and idleness were busy in their congenial ways; people were dressing and dining and driving, hurrying to Lords and Commons, and club and opera, and theatre and music-hall and pothouse. And our two lovers sat in a darkening room on the edge of one of the Parks which are centres of life and fashion, and were isolated and happy and self-sufficing as Hermann and Dorothea might have been, or the lone pair in the legend, whose fate it was to discover Madeira.

Perhaps it was because this was all so sweet, romantic, and delightful that Gabrielle seemed to shrink from the remonstrances and expostulations which were sure to pour in on her when their intended marriage should come to be made known to the class of inconvenient creatures whom lovers have to describe as their friends. It was not that Gabrielle cared in the least for what anybody might say, or that her resolve could in any way be affected by it; but she shrank from the profanation of wise people's worldly advices and grating expostulations, and from the very thought of having to stand up for her chosen lover against the accusations of sagacious elders. She knew

that she would herself be accused of a want of consistency, of fickleness, and of levity, in consenting to marry so soon after she had declared to more than one that she would never marry again. In her own mind her vindication was clear. 'I never did mean to marry again,' she had said to herself, and to Fielding too sometimes. 'I only cared for one man in all the world, and I didn't think he cared about me. Now I know that he does, and what is there inconsistent in that?' Yet she dreaded the inevitable expostulations all the same, and for the same reason, because they seemed to profane the love which they could not avail to change.

These evenings were not many. They were only a few delightful hours of quiet happiness and undisturbed love before the necessary announcement, to Gabrielle's friends, of the step she was about to take. For a while only Wilberforce knew anything of the truth; and so long as it was to be a secret from the world they knew that it would be safe with him. So they enjoyed in peace their 'modest gloaming,' like the lovers in the Ettrick Shepherd's sweet poem; and if Gabrielle was sometimes tremulous and anxious, it was only because the happiness was all too new to her, and seemed too exquisite to last very long. One evening she asked him abruptly:

'Should you like us to die together—now?'

'Not I,' Fielding answered with unmistakable earnestness. 'I should much rather we lived together.'

'But if one of us had to die—would you not be willing to die with me?'

'I should be willing to die for you, if that could serve you, Gabrielle; how could I not be willing to die with you? what motive could I have for living without you?'

'I grow afraid sometimes,' she said, 'that this cannot last; and then I think that it would be a delightful thing if we were to die at once, you and I, and so make the past secure.'

He looked into her eyes and saw that they were filled with tears. She tried to avoid his look.

'I always thought that love made people brave and strong,' she said, trying to smile through her tears; 'it seems to be making me a very weak and cowardly creature. I was never afraid of anything before, and now I am always in a kind of terror; and I become filled with fancies and omens, and I think I see shadows of coming disappointment in everything. And I never was vain before, or cared whether anyone thought me good-looking or not; and now I find my mind taken up with ideas about whether I look as well to-day as I did yesterday,

and all such nonsense. I used to be courageous, and not a coward. I used to feel sure that everything would turn out for the best; and now I keep thinking that something must happen to come between us. Shall I never be brave again?’

‘You will be brave again,’ he said, ‘the very moment that any occasion comes to call on you for courage.’

‘We will go away from England for a while—don’t you think?’ she said hesitatingly.

He gently assured her that they should go to any part of the world she chose to name, and stay there as long as she wished.

‘I feel,’ she said, ‘as if I should like some soft place with sweet warm air and a sky without winds; and a life not so eager as our English life; and where there were not many people that we knew. I should like to go somewhere on the other side of mountains—don’t you understand?—I don’t know how to explain it in any other words. Somewhere on the other side of blue mountains.’

He understood what she meant. He too began to long to be away anywhere with her, they two alone. When he left her that evening he wandered for long hours, following the river’s course, aimlessly, full of his happiness and his love. He often thus rambled away when he had left her one evening and was not to see her until the next. The spirit of unrest seemed to master him when she was not near.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT PEOPLE SAID.

MAJOR LEVEN and his wife had finished breakfast one morning and were alone when Gabrielle Vanthorpe came to see them. She did not often visit them at such an hour; indeed, she had not for some days visited them at all. Mrs. Leven had of late begun to find that somehow or other the old relationships were not renewing themselves. She welcomed Gabrielle’s visit now as a good omen.

‘I do hope, dearest Gabrielle,’ she said effusively, ‘that you have come to tell us you have changed your mind, and that you will go with us.’

The Levens were going to the Pyrenees almost immediately. Major Leven was anxious to get away anywhere out of town until Paulina should cease to be a heroine.

‘Do come with us, Gabrielle,’ he said cheerily; ‘the trip

would do you ever so much good. Don't be afraid of our accusing you of fickleness, because you have changed your mind.'

'I wish we could prevail upon you to change it as to another matter too, my Gabrielle,' Mrs. Leven said significantly. 'I saw poor Sir Wilberforce yesterday; he looks quite depressed.'

'I haven't changed my mind about the Pyrenees; I can't go,' Gabrielle said. 'But I wanted to talk to you about something else—no, not about Sir Wilberforce.'

At that moment a card was brought to Major Leven, who looked up with some surprise after reading the name and some words written on it.

'Remember the Scottish proverb, Gabrielle,' he said, 'if it is not Bran it is Bran's brother. Here is Bran's brother—I mean Sir Wilberforce's brother—wants to speak with me about something very particular. Don't go until I come back, Gabrielle, my dear; I dare say he will not remain very long.'

Major Leven hastened away to see Bran's brother.

'I wonder what he can want with George,' Mrs. Leven said; 'I don't like that young man; and I don't think he much likes us.'

'I can tell you what he has to say to Major Leven,' Gabrielle said quietly. 'It is just what I have come to say to you, Mrs. Leven.' She answered a deprecatory gesture at the use of the cold words 'Mrs. Leven' by saying quickly: 'Better hear my story first, and then tell me what to call you. Mr. Fielding and I have the same story to tell; and we came at the same time to tell it.'

Mrs. Leven knew it all now. She turned pale, and her lips trembled.

'Mr. Fielding and I have found out,' Gabrielle went on, growing more and more composed and mistress of herself now that the worst was over, 'that we are very much attached to each other; and we are going to be married. I came to tell you that, Mrs. Leven. I know you won't like it; but I know too that I am doing right. I love him very much, and I think I can make him happy.'

'I never thought to hear you utter such words—never!'

'Nor I,' said Gabrielle.

'I don't understand what you mean, Gabrielle.'

'I only mean that this is almost as much of a surprise to me as it can be to you; at least, it was.'

'Then do you mean to say that you have really plunged into this insane engagement on the whim of a moment, and without knowing your own mind?'

'Oh, no.' Gabrielle felt her colour rising, and her courage too. 'I don't mean anything of the kind. I have known my own mind this long time; I didn't know his mind. That was the surprise.'

'Is this womanly, Gabrielle?'

'I think so,' said Gabrielle.

Mrs. Leven remained silent for a moment. She could hardly find suitable words. She could have found strong words enough; but there was something in Gabrielle's quiet self-sustained manner that told her they would be out of place now. The rebellion against old authority was evidently complete.

'Gabrielle,' Mrs. Leven began at last, 'your mother was my dearest friend—'

'Yes,' Gabrielle said very gently; 'I am glad you remember that.'

'I used to lament for her—now how can I lament for her any more? What could she have said if she had lived to see this day? What would she have felt?'

'She would have felt happy in her daughter's happiness, I am sure. She would have loved the man I love, for my sake; and when she knew him, for his own.'

'You profane your mother's name, Gabrielle, when you use it in such a way. Why, do you know what manner of man this is—this man that you have allowed to make love to you? or did you make love to him perhaps? Which was it?'

'I think it was one and the other,' Gabrielle answered very composedly. Mrs. Leven seemed to her now so utterly in the wrong, unsympathetic, and unkind, that she really felt no longer anything but an almost contemptuous compassion for her. 'I am sadly afraid I did some of the love-making—'

'And you are not ashamed to confess it?'

'Oh, no.'

'Have you heard what people say about the sort of life he has led? Do you know that he broke his father heart?'

'I know he did not; I know that his father was in the wrong, and not he—'

'He says so, I suppose, and you believe it?'

'Oh, no, Sir Wilberforce often told me so; he never did.'

'But you must have heard what people say of him?'

'I don't know—I may have heard some of it. I don't care what anyone in the world says of him.'

'A man of whom you know nothing but that he has the reputation of a vagabond and an outlaw, or something very like it! Why, you don't even know, Gabrielle, whether he is the

person he claims to be or not. How do you know that he is Sir Wilberforce Fielding's brother? Sir Wilberforce says he would never have known him again. There is not the least resemblance between them. You foolish girl, take care what you are doing. I don't believe he is Sir Wilberforce's brother at all—oh, George.'

For Major Leven now came back into the room, looking very grave and gloomy. He glanced at Gabrielle, and then at his wife, and shrugged his shoulders.

'I confess I don't like this business, Gabrielle,' he said. 'I suppose you have been telling Constance? It is all too sudden; I don't believe you know your own mind. You go on like a romantic girl; you think this young man is a hero of romance, and at war with society, and all that. You will very soon find such dreams won't do for the real world.'

'He has been telling you, I suppose,' Mrs. Leven said—'that young man? He must have some courage, I think.'

'Oh, the young man said what he had to say very well,' Major Leven explained, 'as far as that goes, I have nothing to say against Mr. Fielding personally. He is a very modest and gentlemanlike young man. I don't blame him for falling in love with our Gabrielle; I dare say he couldn't help himself. But I don't at all like the idea of Gabrielle marrying him. She hasn't known him long; she doesn't know anything about him. He seems to have led a queer wild sort of life, though I dare say there is a deuced deal of exaggeration in the stories they tell about him. He *was* a trooper in a cavalry regiment in India; but only, he says, because he wanted to see what that sort of thing was like. And he was for a while with the Cuban insurgents. I dare say he has been a gallant young fellow enough; but that isn't the sort of man we want for a husband for Gabrielle.'

'He is just the sort of man I want, Major Leven,' Gabrielle said good-humouredly. 'I wish you liked him too; I wish I could persuade you to appreciate him.'

'Well, well, my dear, of course it's very natural you should think so, and all that; and I dare say he is the sort of man to attract a young woman; but I think too much of you, Gabrielle, to be satisfied so easily. I thought you would have liked some one quite different. I am afraid you are doing a—well, a very Quixotic thing—'

'A mad thing,' Mrs. Leven interposed.

Gabrielle rose to go. She thought she had done her part in making the announcement, and she did not care for any more

of the argument. She was sorry to part from her old friends on unfriendly terms; but she had to choose, and she had chosen.

Major Leven took her hand kindly, and held it in his. 'Is there no use in trying to argue with you, Gabrielle? Is your mind then really made up? Can your friends do nothing?'

'Nothing, Major Leven, except to give me useless pain, perhaps, by saying what I ought not to hear.'

'The truth is often painful to hear, Gabrielle,' Mrs. Leven said, 'when people are bent on taking the wrong course; but it has to be spoken for all that.'

'Well, well,' Major Leven intervened, 'if Gabrielle is determined, I don't know that there is any use in our saying hard things to her, Constance. But I can't approve of this, Gabrielle. I wish you may be happy, my dear, very sincerely; but I am afraid you are not going the right way to secure your happiness.'

Nothing more was said; and so they parted. It was a relief to Gabrielle that the ungracious task was done. She knew that Mrs. Leven and she were now separated for ever so far as friendship went; and she was not sorry.

'That man will live in my Albert's house,' Mrs. Leven cried out in a burst of bitter emotion, when Gabrielle had gone.

'I don't think so,' said her husband. 'You will find they have some Quixotic project in their minds; I am sure of it, Constance.'

Great was the astonishment created in certain small circles by the news that Gabrielle Vanthorpe was to marry the younger brother of Sir Wilberforce Fielding—the vagabond ne'er-do-well son of the rich old philanthropist Sir Jacob Fielding. The sudden reappearance of the young man himself had excited a good deal of curiosity and talk; and now this marriage-story came to revive a drooping sensation. The most extravagant rumours were afloat concerning the early life and adventures of Clarkson Fielding. Some people believed that he had lived among the Indians in America, 'somewhere out West, as they put it. Another legend was that he had acted as fencing-master to the princes of some vaguely named Hindostanee dynasty. Others, again, said that he had been a sailor, and had risen to be mate of a ship. Some were assured that he had made a fortune in Nevada; while some were equally confident that he had not sixpence in the world, and that he was marrying the handsome young Gabrielle Vanthorpe for her money. Then there came, to complicate things still more, the distinct asser-

tion that Gabrielle Vanthorpe was giving away all the money she had, as a preliminary to getting married again. Whereupon certain ladies who had known her a little, and not liked her very much, nor thought her nearly so good-looking as some people did, observed that they had always felt sure there was a touch of madness in that poor Mrs. Vanthorpe.

Sir Wilberforce went to work loyally, so far as he was concerned, to set absurd rumour right. 'It's a very sensible marriage, just the right sort of marriage,' he repeated everywhere. 'Gad, I wish she would have married me—at least, I don't, you know, because of poor Clarkson; he's more the right sort of husband for her by far, he's young and good-looking. But only for that, I mean, I wish she could have married me. Poor? Oh, no, my brother Clarkson has a lot of money standing to his account; a lot of money for one who needn't keep up any appearance more than he likes, you know; and he's a very clever fellow, able to do anything now when he settles down. I want him to go into Parliament, as I have no taste that way; poor father would have liked one of us to be in the House. Clarkson's all right enough. No, I don't think it a bit foolish of her not to keep the property she had. A little romantic? Yes, yes; but young people ought to be romantic, don't you think so?' No, no? Why not? You see Clarkson's an odd, independent sort of fellow—always was; he wouldn't like the idea of coming in for another fellow's money, don't you know?'

'Are they to be married in London?' some curious person would inquire in a tone half-suggesting that this absurd and eccentric pair would perhaps feel it a duty to their respectable relations to take themselves off somewhere out of civilisation, in order that their marriage ceremony might be accomplished in becoming obscurity.

'In London? Yes, yes, from Lady Honeybell's. Mrs. Vanthorpe is staying at Lady Honeybell's until the marriage. Do you know Lady Honeybell? No? The kindest woman; yes, yes.'

So people were only puzzled more and more. The marriage was evidently approved of not only by Sir Wilberforce Fielding, who was universally accounted a pattern of respectability, but even by Lady Honeybell, who was the wife of an earl. Some few persons were delighted to hear of the marriage. One of these was Miss Elvin. She could not conceal her gratification that Mrs. Vanthorpe had had to put up with the good-for-nothing younger son after all. She utterly declined to believe that Gabrielle had been proposed to by Sir Wilberforce, before

Clarkson came with his offer. On the contrary, she gave with much vivacity her account of the affair; how Clarkson made love to the young widow, how Gabrielle, being determined to marry some one, because she had missed her game with young Mr. Taxal, accepted Clarkson promptly, and was terribly let in when the elder brother, with the title and the property, came and made his offer the very next day. Miss Elvin was fast acquiring quite a reputation as a wit. She felt herself growing in power with each new repetition of her story about poor Mrs. Vanthorpe's disappointment. The curious thing about it was that it gave her a genuine pleasure even to tell those parts of the story that she knew not to be true. One of her strongest reasons for hating Gabrielle was because she fancied that, only for Gabrielle and her spells, Walter Taxal would certainly have converted her, Gertrude Elvin, into the Honourable Mrs. Taxal. She knew perfectly well that Walter had fallen in love with Gabrielle, and had asked her to marry him, and she hated Gabrielle for it. Yet it not merely gratified her malice, but it positively soothed her self-conceit, to go about telling people that Mrs. Vanthorpe had tried her best to get young Mr. Taxal, Lord Taxal's son, and had failed. She liked to hear the thing said, even by herself. The French lady who said it pleased her to hear the sound of a compliment, even though she knew it not to be true, and even though it was only said by herself to herself, would find, if she studied the meannesses of others as fairly as she did her own, that malice can be fed on food as unsubstantial as vanity itself. Miss Elvin was becoming a decided success in the musical world. Her concerts were always attended by a fashionable crowd. Places had to be taken for them long in advance. She drove in her brougham—hired, to be sure, but hired for the season, and therefore in a manner her own. Her brother dressed very handsomely, and devoted himself to acting as her escort and her man of business. She was really attached to him, and even looked up to him, though he could do nothing in particular. She liked to see him well dressed, and to know that her money made him a gentleman. Everything was smiling on her. Yet she could not forgive Gabrielle Vanthorpe for not having appreciated her singing, for having nevertheless patronised her, and for having brought her to meet people like the Charltons. Miss Elvin had to the full that peculiar form of the artistic temperament which Heine illustrates humorously, when he speaks of marrying some lovely being and getting divorced from her if she does not praise his verses as highly as he thinks they deserve.

Meanwhile the lovers went on loving, and wholly indifferent to what their friends and enemies were saying. Gabrielle Vanthorpe had taken up her abode, for the time, with Lady Honeybell, and Fielding stayed for the most part in an hotel not far away. They had, for the present, to do without the exquisite hours of gloaming; for they saw each other only in the usual prosaic way proper to well-ordered conventionality. Mrs. Bramble and her husband took care of Gabrielle's little house for the present, and Fielding came there sometimes at the same hour of gloaming, and got Mrs. Bramble's leave to sit alone in the room where Gabrielle and he had sat before. A very harmless amusement, Mrs. Bramble thought, and she fancied he must find it dull, and she once asked him wouldn't he like to have the lamps lighted. But he thanked her and said no, he preferred to sit in the room as it was; and when it grew almost quite dark he always got up and went away. Mrs. Bramble thought him rather an eccentric young man, but she liked his friendly, frank ways, and his genial smile; and she sometimes said, 'Well, one can't blame poor Miss Gabrielle,' as she still occasionally called her, 'after all.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

PAULINA LAUNCHES HER FIRE-SHIP.

THERE was one person on whose ears the news of Gabrielle's approaching marriage came with a startling effect. Paulina Vanthorpe had become a sort of heroine, with a certain class of persons who are always looking out for the victim of a grievance. She had actually taken a hall, and held meetings to discourse of her wrongs. She had mixed up somehow the cause of woman's rights, and the wickedness of compulsory vaccination, with her own personal wrongs; and, in the minds of ordinary persons, produced a sort of confusion as to whether the Mrs. Vanthorpe who addressed public meetings was the heroine of an agitation against private madhouses, or a feminine copy of the Tichborne Claimant, or a champion of the right of women to enter the medical profession, or an American lady inspired to denounce the evils of the marriage system. For a time things went rather swimmingly with her. She managed to attract audiences; she delivered orations in a strong shrill voice, with much energy of dramatic action, and on any subject that

happened to occur to her mind at the moment. She got invitations to attend other meetings; she appeared as the supporter of the crotchet of anyone who chose to invite her. She was quite a distinguished person; and in more than one instance, the prospective candidate for a metropolitan borough had been asked, by a deputation of voters, to favour them with his opinions on the question of Mrs. Vanthorpe and her wrongs, before they could see their way to support his claims to a seat in Parliament. Paulina therefore was busy, and, for the time, happy. She was really under the impression that she was becoming a remarkable public character, and her vanity was fed on the absurd applauses she received. She felt satisfied, too, that she was greatly tormenting the Levens; and that was a joy to her. But in the midst of her business, and her public triumph, she suddenly learned that Gabrielle Vanthorpe was to marry Clarkson Fielding. The strongest passion of her nature was that of hate. Revenge was sweeter to her than the wearing of fine clothes, or the gratification of vanity. The Eastern princess who said that there was only one sound she enjoyed more than hymns of praise, namely, the groans of tortured enemies, would have found a sister and a sympathetic spirit in Paulina. Paulina would have made an excellent Oriental princess, if her destinies had been cast a little differently. It was only her accidental misfortune that her early years were passed in a Seven Dials' publichouse, and not in the royal Palace of Delhi.

When she heard the news, she first gave free vent to one of her paroxysms of rage, stamped, wallowed, broke a few glasses and other fragile things, and then, recovering, prepared for more practical action. She hated Clarkson Fielding. She felt sure she could have established herself safely among the Levens and Vanthorpes only for him. She had an old spite, too, against him. The bitter injury of the despised form, which drove goddesses to deeds of unworthy vengeance, rankled in the very human heart of Paulina Vanthorpe. As nearly as such a woman could go to falling in love she had once gone to falling in love with Clarkson Fielding; and she had been repelled, and even rebuked by him, in a way as surprising as it was humiliating to her. All her old anger returned when she thought of his marrying Gabrielle. She filled her mind with the conviction that he had stood between her and every object which she had particularly at heart, and she determined that it should go hard with her but she would be even with him for once. She racked her brain for some device, and at last she hit upon

a little plot which for absurd audacity would have done credit to the immortal Scapin, or to one of the Raphaels and Ambroses and other gifted adventurers who made the acquaintance of Gil Blas.

It was from some words of Gabrielle's own that the ingenious Paulina caught this idea. The destinies seemed to have resolved that Gabrielle should never do a kindly thing, or speak a friendly word, but that some result perplexing to herself should come of it. During Paulina's stay at Gabrielle's house the good-natured Gabrielle had endeavoured in many ways to assure her of the interest which some of his connections, at least, had always taken in the fortunes of the outcast Philip Vanthorpe. Among other things, Gabrielle told her of the wild idea she had formed at first about Clarkson Fielding; how she actually got it into her head that he was the long-lost Philip Vanthorpe; how she even persuaded herself that she could trace a distinct resemblance between his face and that of Mrs. Leven, as she studied their features at the concert in Lady Honeybell's drawing-room. The idea struck Paulina now all of a sudden. To say that it struck her is only a fair way of describing what actually occurred, for it made her cheeks flush with a sudden crimson, and it made her eyes sparkle and flame; and she jumped up, and danced about the floor, screaming out that she had got Master Clarkson now, at last. There was a certain dash of the maniac in Paulina, along with her sane shrewd adventuress qualities. In her controversy with the Levens she often found herself positively carried away by a self-wrought sense of wrong. She sometimes succeeded in persuading herself that she was Major Leven's step-daughter, or even daughter. Other slatternly minds are wanting in any clear perception of the literal truth; Paulina's was wanting in a perception even of the actual truth. The latest, hardest facts of her own life were liable to be blurred, or entirely transfigured, by the passion or wish of the moment. She was capable of starting an imposture in cold blood for a definite purpose, and was liable to become, before long, one of its completest dupes. The author of a work of fiction, once the delight of unnumbered slums and now probably forgotten even there, has left it on record that, in describing some daring adventure of his highwayman hero, he became so completely possessed by his own creative powers that he leaped, danced, and shouted all about his room, and seemed to gallop with mad speed like his hero, and like him to hurl laughter and defiance at pursuing foes. Had Paulina's early education prepared her for the

writing of such fiction, she would probably have identified herself to the full with the fortunes of her favourite personage, and made its delights and passions and triumphs her own. Perhaps, if the Education Act and the School Boards had started a little earlier, they might have secured this honourable opening for the imaginative powers of Paulina, and she would have gratified her vanity and avenged her wrongs in the comparatively harmless pages of the sensation romance.

Paulina thought a good deal about the best way of launching her little fire-ship. It became clear to her almost at once that the effect of the revelation she proposed to make would be greatly enhanced by its coming out in a spontaneous and accidental sort of way.

The Charltons were in their room in Bolingbroke Place one night. Robert was working, Janet sewing as usual. Robert was a little more cheerful than usual; for since Paulina Vanthorpe had become a public character he thought there was more chance of her dispensing with his services, and he was beginning to have a hope that the acquaintanceship might fade away without bringing any particular disgrace or harm on him. To them presently bustled in Mr. Lefussis, who, although he fancied he saw himself getting up in the world again, was not yet able to renounce his humble lodgings, and was not disposed to give up his old friends. He was full of talk and good spirits. There had been certain hints held out to him of a possible change of government, and of men coming in who, on the urgent recommendation of some of his friends, might reward his long public services with some small Colonial appointment. The mere hope of such a thing was as much to Lefussis as an actual invitation to join a Cabinet would be to another man. Mr. Lefussis was already beginning to think what he could do for Charlton, and, indeed, was already hinting at something of the kind, much to Charlton's disgust.

A rapid, rather authoritative succession of knocks was heard. Janet opened the door, and was confronted by a lady of imposing presence clad in trailing silks.

'Is Mr. Charlton in?' the lady asked. 'Oh, thank you, yes; I see that he is.' She swept past Janet, who began to fancy this must be some imperious countess, at the least, whose work Robert had neglected to complete at the appointed time. 'How do you do, Mr. Charlton? Pray don't disturb yourself. I was below-stairs, and I thought I'd come to see you. This is your wife, I presume? Won't you do me the favour to introduce me, Mr. Charlton?'

Robert was pale with fear and anger. He seemed as if he were swearing under his breath. He had to do the honours.

'This is my wife,' he said. 'Janet, this lady is Mrs. Vanthorpe. You have heard me speak of her.'

As a matter of fact, Janet had never heard him speak of her. Naturally the name and performances of Paulina had been talked about a good deal when Janet's aunt came to visit her relatives in Bolingbroke Place; but Janet had always observed that Robert would not join in the conversation or say a word about the much-talked-of woman. She set this down in her own mind to Robert's conviction that Paulina was not a person to be made the subject of conversation among people with becoming ideas of propriety. She did not know that he had ever seen Paulina before; and she was surprised to hear Paulina claim him as an acquaintance. She turned cold, and felt miserable. She faintly acknowledged the gracious bow of Paulina, and shrank back. Mr. Lefussis, meanwhile, handed Paulina a chair, with all the greater show of courtesy because, since the famous night at St. James's Hall, he regarded her in the light of a political opponent.

'I think I have had the pleasure of meeting this gentleman before?' the queenly Paulina observed, turning to Mr. Lefussis, and bending her long neck at him. 'Mr. Fuzbuz, if I am not mistaken?'

'Lefussis, madam, Mr. Lefussis,' the owner of that name replied. 'It is an old Norman name. My ancestor Jasper de Lefussis——'

'Came over with the Conqueror, didn't he?'

'He did,' Mr. Lefussis answered, somewhat astonished at the variety and accuracy of her historical information.

'I thought as much,' Paulina observed. 'They all did, I fancy, more or less. Finding of the body of Harold, and all that, ain't it? I used to hear all about it.'

Mr. Lefussis began to be somewhat puzzled now by the manner of her observations.

'I don't exactly remember now who the Conqueror was,' the lady said, with a gracious laugh; 'but I know that he brought no end of people over with him. Anyhow, that's neither here nor there, and it will be all the same to us a hundred years hence. We ain't enemies, I hope, Mr. Lefussis, although we did happen once to be opposed in public?'

Lefussis was for once rather put out. He bowed solemnly, and mumbled some words supposed to express chivalric readiness to accept any terms Paulina chose to offer.

'I oughtn't to feel annoyed, anyhow; I won the battle that night—eh, Mr. Lefussis? I think I see the old Major sneaking off the platform now. I have had great wrongs, Mr. Lefussis, as you would admit if you were not prejudiced by your friendship for them Levens; but I don't blame you for holding by your friends; it isn't quite too common a thing in this world just now.' Paulina sighed, and laid a strong emphasis on the word 'this,' as if she were well acquainted with various other worlds where a stauncher spirit of friendship informed the beings that inhabited them.

Then Paulina turned to the general company, and observed that she had come that way to see Mr. Fielding, and not finding him in his rooms had felt that she ought to avail herself of the opportunity to visit the Charltons, and see Mrs. Charlton, of whom she had heard so much. Janet shuddered.

'I thought, perhaps, you could tell me something about Mr. Fielding,' Paulina went on. 'I was in his rooms, but he is not there. What a careless fellow he is! He never locks his door, I believe. Anybody may go in or out.'

'He is very careless,' Charlton said eagerly. He was very glad to bring out prominently the fact that anybody could go into Fielding's rooms, for he was still afraid that something might come of his having furtively gone in there.

'Oh yes, I was in there just now,' Paulina said. 'I could have carried off anything if I wanted to, or read all his letters,' and she gave her shrill little laugh. 'I have often been there before.'

'Have you often been there before?' Janet asked, speaking with a tremor in her voice, but determined not to let this startling assertion pass unchallenged.

'Oh yes, ever so often. Fielding and I are old friends, as your husband knows. Didn't he ever tell you, Mrs. Charlton? I say, Charlton, I begin to think you keep secrets from your little wife. I thought you were like turtle-doves.'

'I don't talk gossip and other people's affairs to my wife,' Charlton said, growing hot and embarrassed. 'Our own concerns are enough for us.'

'Enough for her, don't you mean?' Paulina asked, with another laugh. 'That's how it is. You see he's getting angry, Mrs. Charlton. Oh, I begin to fancy he is a sly one.'

'You were asking about Mr. Fielding,' the chivalric Lefussis interposed, anxious at any cost to turn the conversation to some neutral subject. 'I don't fancy he will come very often to his chambers here any more. I have been talking to him

about them; he will be giving them up, of course, and I think they would suit me better than the set I have.'

One of the many illusions shining happily over the life of poor Lefussis was that he was just about to give up the rooms he had, and go into a more expensive and commodious set of chambers. He was proceeding to enlarge upon the subject, when Paulina interrupted him by asking in a tone of some surprise,

'Why should he be giving up these chambers? Why "of course"? Where is he going to?'

'Well, you know, of course, when he gets married——'

'When he gets what?'

'When he gets married.'

'When he gets fiddlesticks!' Paulina said, turning in her chair with a contemptuous gesture.

'I did not say when he gets fiddlesticks,' Mr. Lefussis answered with dignity. 'I know nothing about his getting fiddlesticks. I said when he gets married.'

'Stuff!—he ain't going to get married.'

'Oh, yes,' Janet said quietly, 'he is.'

'To whom, ma'am, may I ask?' Paulina wheeled round upon Janet, and fixed her glittering eyes on the timid little woman. Janet, however, felt more dislike now than dread of her questioner.

'To Mrs. Albert Vanthorpe.'

Paulina rose from her chair.

'To the young woman Gabrielle?'

'To the young lady whose christian name is Gabrielle,' Janet answered, with less tremor than before.

'It's a lie!' exclaimed Paulina.

'Oh, madam, pray'—Mr. Lefussis expostulated.

'I don't mean it's a lie for you, Mr. Fuzbuz,' Paulina went on breathlessly, 'nor for you, Mrs. Charlton—which forgive me if I seemed to say; far from it, indeed. But it's a lie for him, if he says it—and I can't believe he does say it.'

'Everybody says it, madam,' Lefussis observed.

'I don't care about everybody, Mr. Fuzbuz——'

'Lefussis, madam, if you please.'

'Anything you like, sir; it's all one to me just now, I can assure you.'

'But it really is not all one to me, madam, I can assure you.'

'Oh there, don't bother. I ask your pardon, I didn't mean to offend you; but can't you understand that there are things

more important to us all sometimes than other people's names? I dare say there are times when you wouldn't care a straw if my name was Jack Robinson. What I want to know is—who says Fielding is going to marry Gabrielle Vanthorpe?

'He says it himself, if that is all you want to know,' Robert Charlton replied, feeling a genuine interest in the turn the talk had now taken. 'He told me of it the last day I saw him.'

'He told me so too,' Lefussis said. 'At least, I offered him my congratulations on the faith of a certain rumour, and he accepted them, and gave me to understand that the rumour was true.'

'Why, of course it is true,' Janet added.

'Then I tell you what—he is a liar; and, mark my words, this marriage will never take place.'

'Why not?' Charlton asked. 'Who will prevent it?'

Paulina tossed her head scornfully.

'I will prevent it.'

'I think, Charlton, if you will allow me,' Lefussis said, 'we had better change the conversation. I don't feel as if I had any right to enter into this matter, and I'm sure you don't, and Mrs. Charlton. Whatever this lady may have to say——'

'She'll say it out in the open day, you may be sure, Mr. a—a—Thingumbob; and she'll stand by it too. You may stay and hear it, if you like. All the world shall hear it soon. I want Charlton to hear it, and his wife; for they will tell me what to do. I tell you again, I can prevent this marriage, and I will.'

'I think, Charlton, I had rather go,' Lefussis said; and he backed out of the room.

Charlton was eager to hear what Paulina had to say. He was longing to know something against Fielding, and he hated the thought of his being married to Gabrielle.

'How can you prevent it?' he asked in a half-contemptuous tone, designed to goad Paulina on to a full revelation.

'Prevent it? I'll tell you how I'll prevent it. Can a man marry two women, both alive? He can't. Very well, then; Clarkson Fielding is married already.'

Charlton was really startled at this; he had not expected anything so strong. Janet felt as if she might faint at any moment.

'But how could you prove this?' Charlton asked. 'How could you know it for certain?'

'I do know it for certain.'

'The other wife would have to be produced—his wife, I mean.'

Paulina folded her arms across her breast with the air of a tragedy queen.

'I am his wife!' she said.

A thrill of utter incredulity went through the listeners now; and there was some horror mingled with the incredulity. They now began, Charlton as well as his wife, to think that they were talking to a mad-woman.

'But,' Charlton said, quietly and almost soothingly, 'you know that couldn't be, Mrs. Vanthorpe,' and he laid an emphasis on the name. 'You know that your husband was Mr. Philip Vanthorpe.'

A smile of superior scorn passed over Paulina's lips, and she looked from one face to another, as if enjoying their bewilderment before she disposed of their doubts for ever.

'My husband was Philip Vanthorpe,' she said, 'and he is Philip Vanthorpe. The man you call Clarkson Fielding is Philip Vanthorpe himself, and nobody else!'

Charlton struck the table sharply with his fist.

'I knew there was something wrong about that man,' he exclaimed. 'I knew it from the first. I always said so, Janet—didn't I?'

Poor Janet could not answer. She dropped into a chair, and the room seemed to swim around her.

CHAPTER XXX.

'AN EXCELLENT PLOT: VERY GOOD FRIENDS.'

ROBERT CHARLTON doubtless believed for a while in the truth of Paulina's story. From the first he had been eager to believe in it. He detested Fielding. He felt a sort of spite, the reason for which he could hardly have defined even to himself, against Gabrielle. He had always predicted that something would be found out to Fielding's discredit; and his prophetic insight seemed now made good at last. Therefore he went into Paulina's story with an eager hope that it might prove true.

But it was really wonderful what a plausible, consistent tale Paulina told him, and what scraps of corroboratory evidence she brought to sustain it. She made rather Robert Charlton her confidant in the beginning; her leading counsel, so to speak,

who was to advise upon the case and its further progress. Philip Vanthorpe and she were married in haste, she said, and after a while they did not get on very well together. They made the acquaintance of Clarkson Fielding; they were very intimate with him; Philip and he led a very wild life together. Fielding died in New Orleans. Vanthorpe and she had been anxious to return to England, and also anxious to get rid of each other. Philip was convinced his mother would never be reconciled with him, nor did he want to be reconciled with her. But he thought if Paulina were to pass off as his widow she would have a good chance of being taken into favour, and therefore it was settled between them that Paulina was to go back to England with a story of his death and to make the best use she could of it. Then came the death of Clarkson Fielding, and it suddenly occurred to Vanthorpe that it would be a good thing if he were to personate Clarkson Fielding, and see whether he could not recover the money which Fielding had always told them he had left untouched in his brother's hands. The idea had a great fascination for Vanthorpe, who liked audacious enterprises of any kind, and he determined to carry it out. Therefore the pair came to England almost at the same time, but not in the same vessel, and they went to work with their plot. They were to help each other as much as possible, and were to divide the spoils if necessary; but they were not going to live together any more or to acknowledge each other. It was the principal object of each to be rid of the other. "But," Paulina added, "I wasn't going to stand his marrying another woman while Paulina Vanthorpe was alive; not if I knew it. That wasn't in the bargain, and he was a great fool to think any woman would stand that."

That was the story. The points which Paulina impressed upon Charlton were, that she and the man calling himself Clarkson Fielding turned up in London just about the same time, and she appealed to Charlton whether it was not within his own knowledge that this man came to see her often when she was on the Surrey side; that Gabrielle, when first she saw him, was convinced that he was Philip Vanthorpe, from his likeness to Mrs. Leven; that Gabrielle had even taxed him with being Philip Vanthorpe; that Sir Wilberforce Fielding said he should never have known him for his brother; that the professed Fielding never could or would give any clear account of what happened to Vanthorpe; that he and she had always lived in New Orleans under the name of Clarkson, a name which a man whose real name had 'any Clarkson in it,' as

Paulina put it, would not have been likely to adopt for the purpose of concealing his identity.

Eager as he was to believe all this, Robert could not but ask how it happened that the man calling himself Clarkson Fielding had done so much to prevent Gabrielle Vanthorpe and her relations from receiving Paulina. Paulina laughed at what she called his simplicity. All that only came about, she said, when they found that Mrs. Leven was inexorable, and that nothing was to be got out of her; while, on the other hand, Sir Wilberforce was very good-natured, and there was ever so much to be got out of him. Then they believed the best policy was to throw all their strength into what Paulina described as 'the Fielding business,' and it was thought a capital way of turning off any suspicion of conspiracy, and making it certain that he was the real Clarkson Fielding, if he were to play the part of her enemy and to denounce her to the Levens. She was to have her share of the profits, she said; and they had even some hope that, as Sir Wilberforce was not married, Clarkson might in the end come in for the property. It was understood that the so-called Clarkson was to be free, for this reason, to do his best to prevent the marriage between Sir Wilberforce and Gabrielle. 'But it wasn't understood,' Paulina grimly said, 'that he was to marry her himself. He must know precious little of women if he fancied any woman would stand that. He ought to have known more of me, anyhow. I didn't care who he made love to and that sort of thing; but he's not going to marry a woman under my eyes, you may be sure.'

One chance, or apparently chance, allusion threw Robert into such a condition that he would have been glad to believe her if she had charged the so-called Clarkson Fielding with any series of crimes she chose to fancy. 'Why did he live in Bolingbroke Place?' Charlton happened to ask.

'Oh, don't you know!' Paulina asked, with an odd little laugh.

'No, I don't,' Charlton said roughly; 'tell me.'

'Well, I don't know, I'm sure—one oughtn't to tell, perhaps. Can't you guess at all?'

'I can't guess; I want you to tell me.' He was now growing hot and angry. 'I must know.'

'Well, I say, you are a soft one! I don't know, you see, Charlton, any more than you. He never told me, you may be sure, any more than he did you; not likely. I only guess. But then I seem to know a little more of the world than you do, anyhow.'

'I wish you would speak plainly,' Charlton said, jumping from his seat.

'Lord, man, you needn't get so excited about it. You needn't care twopence; your little wife is as good as a little angel, anyone can see that; but she's a very pretty little woman, Charlton, and you don't ought to be surprised that other men should admire her as well as her husband. Lord bless you, men are all alike. The times that men would have made love to me, if I had only allowed them! But I was always like your little wife, Charlton—keep them at a distance always, that's my motto, even the best of them. You see what thanks I am getting from my husband.'

Robert felt himself almost going wild with passion. He hated Paulina now; but he would have made himself her slave for the purpose of seeing her plans prove successful. Half-unconsciously, not without some consciousness, he kept suggesting doubts as to certain parts of her story, and with the doubts the additions or explanations that might satisfy them. Paulina caught at every hint, and was ready with any missing links of evidence. The story soon began to grow into shape and consistency.

Most of these conferences took place in Janet's presence; only the talk about her and her attractiveness was held during a short absence of hers. She was virtually thrust into a corner. Her opinion was never asked. She had to sit and look on while these two were arranging evidence under her eyes. Robert quelled her into silence if she attempted to interpose a word; and the tall, showy woman acted as if the household were her own. She came every day, and Robert put everything aside for her. Janet could hardly recognise him any more. He was like what she had sometimes read of—a man possessed by a demon. She began to be ashamed of him as well as afraid. The place and her whole life were becoming hateful to her.

'Robert,' she began one evening, after the odious visitor had gone, 'how long are we to have this horrid woman coming here?'

He looked up, and for a while did not seem as if he intended to answer the question. At last he said:

'Until I understand the whole of her story. I am advising her how to proceed. You ought to feel for her, Janet; any woman ought to feel for her.'

'I so hate her,' Janet said, unable to keep down her feelings.

'Oh, of course,' he said coldly; 'I ought to have remembered --women always hate other women.'

'It isn't that, Robert; I don't hate every woman; but I do hate her, and I don't believe her story.'

'You wouldn't believe anything against him, to be sure,' he said, with a sneer. 'I knew that long ago.'

Janet grew red, but did not resent his words.

'I am sure she's not telling the truth,' she went on. 'Why, Robert, I can see her myself; she catches up everything you say and makes it fit into her story. I can see it.'

'Perhaps you had better say I am in a conspiracy with her to make up a string of lies. Is that your idea?'

'Oh, no,' poor Janet said. 'I know you don't mean it, Robert; but if you were listening as I am, you would see how she catches at things. If you watched her as I do, you would not believe her, I am sure, Robert. You would not, indeed.'

'I did not know that you were so observant a person, or such a judge of evidence. Hadn't you better become a criminal lawyer at once, Janet?'

'And then it seems so cruel and so ungrateful,' Janet said. 'There are we plotting hour after hour with this woman to bring grief to the only person who ever was really kind to us since we were married. I wonder at you, Robert; I do.'

'Who is the only person who was kind to us?' he asked, with livid cheeks. 'Do you mean that fellow—because he paid you compliments, I suppose, and flattered your silly vanity?'

'I mean Mrs. Vanthorpe,' Janet answered, and there was a certain dignity in her simple, firm manner. 'She was kind to us; she tried to do good for us; she always treated you as if you were a friend, Robert, and—and—a gentleman; and I hate to see you joining with this woman against her.' Janet's voice began to give way, and she was evidently on the edge of a burst of tears.

'Why, you fool, do you call that joining against her to save her from being taken in by a man who has a wife already? Why, you are a greater fool than even I thought you—I tell you I am acting as her best friend would act. I am saving her from the schemes of a scoundrel and helping to have them exposed.'

'But I don't believe a word that woman says,' Janet said, falling back on her old position. 'And why should we be the persons to do it? Oh, she will hate us—at least, she won't hate us, perhaps, for she is too good and sweet for that; but she will think badly of us and despise us. If there is any truth in this story, why don't you go and give her fair warning of it, like a man? Let me go and tell her—oh, Robert, do. It wouldn't

seem so bad then as all this secrecy and all this plotting—it looks like plotting. Let me go and tell her.'

'Go and tell her that your husband is plotting against her? That is just what you would like to do, I dare say——'

'Oh, no, Robert; how can you say so? Only just to warn her; just to put her on her guard, that the poor young lady mayn't be taken quite by surprise. Why, Robert, it might kill her.'

'Perhaps you would like to go and warn him too, lest he should be taken by surprise? You had just better do so.'

Janet's colour came up again. She began to despise her husband. She was silent. Her silence seemed to impress him somehow more than her words had done; for he said after a while, in a tone intended to be gentle and more persuasive:

'Look here, Janet: you are very foolish. Don't you see that this woman's story may prove not to be true at all? And why should we torment Mrs. Vanthorpe about a story that may be all false? I am sifting this woman's statement very carefully. I hope you will admit that I am not wholly devoid of brains, although I am your husband, Janet; and if I find that it breaks down, you may be sure I shall know how to act. But it would be simple madness to breathe a word of it to Mrs. Vanthorpe just yet. Your supposed friendship would only lead you into a mere act of unnecessary cruelty. Don't you see that yourself?'

'If I only could think that you wished it not to be true! But you go on to her as if you wanted it all to come out true.'

'It's nothing to me whether it's true or false; only, if it is true, I don't want an innocent lady made a victim and a scoundrel to go unpunished. Perhaps you would rather see the lady victimised than the scoundrel punished; but that isn't my way.'

'But why does that woman come here to us? I hate to see her always here.'

'Jealous of her, I suppose?' Robert said, with a sneer. 'I don't think you need be alarmed, Janet.'

'She is a beast,' said Janet emphatically.

Robert laughed. 'Just like women,' he said. 'I believe she is a little bit jealous of you, Janet.'

'Jealous of me?' Janet asked in wonder and anger. She was growing surprisingly courageous of late.

'Oh, yes, I think so. She is under the impression that her husband was quite taken by your charms.'

'Her husband?'

'Yes, her husband. The fellow that used to live below stairs. She is under the impression that he took chambers here in order to have the pleasure of looking at you.'

'I didn't believe he was her husband before,' said Janet; 'I know he is not now. I know there isn't a word of truth in all she says. Look here, Robert: I won't have that woman coming here any more. No, I'll not have it.'

Charlton looked up amazed. His wife was standing up now, and there was a sparkle in her eyes such as he had not seen before. She was trembling all over; but she had evidently plucked up a spirit.

The stairs of Bolingbroke Place were given to much creaking. The step of a mounting visitor was heard a long way in advance when there was no other noise prevailing. This was now the quiet evening hour—about six, when Bolingbroke Place was having its tea. The silence of the house was disturbed for Charlton and his wife by the light rapid tread of a woman coming up the stairs. It came nearer and nearer.

'It is she!' Janet exclaimed. 'Oh, yes, it's she.'

'It's who?' Charlton asked, catching some of his wife's excitement.

'It's Mrs. Vanthorpe! I know her step; she's coming here.'

Robert jumped up.

'Now, remember, Janet, if you say a word of this, you may make her miserable for nothing; and I'll never forgive you.'

Janet was moving towards the door. He came between and stopped her way.

'Do you understand?' he asked in a fierce, low tone. 'You are not to say a word; not a word.'

'I understand,' Janet said. 'I'll say nothing, Robert—for her sake, mind.'

'For any sake you like,' he replied, 'as long as you hold your tongue.' Then he gave way and allowed her to open the door, which she did even before Gabrielle had knocked.

Gabrielle came in looking like a living illustration of youth and grace and happiness. There was a certain shyness about her manner not usual to it, and which perhaps gave it another charm. She felt her own happiness so much that it made her timid. It seemed to her that she owed a sort of apology to human beings in general for being so happy when they perhaps were not all so. Besides, she had come with the resolve to carry out a somewhat difficult, or at least a somewhat delicate, purpose with the Charltons. She kissed the pale Janet and shook hands with Robert.

'You are looking very pale, Janet,' she said. 'Is she not well, Mr. Charlton?'

'Thank you,' he answered, 'I don't fancy she is unwell. I haven't heard her complain.'

'Ah, but I am afraid that is not quite a proof—I don't think she would complain. She is too much in town, Mr. Charlton; and you too. I see now that you are looking very pale. You ought to get out of this place for a while.'

'People like us can't so easily get out of town; we must stay where our work is. We are no worse off than our neighbours, I dare say.'

His manner was somewhat sharp and brusque; but Gabrielle did not feel in any way hurt by it. She set it down to the not unnatural pride of an unsuccessful man who is resolved to show that he seeks no favour. Just now his words were welcome to her, for they gave her a chance of coming to her point.

'Well,' she said, 'I came to see Janet and you to day for the purpose of saying something about that. You know I suppose'—and she hesitated a little and coloured—'that I am going to be—married soon—to Mr. Fielding?'

Yes; the Charltons both stammered out that they had heard, and Robert added something about congratulations. As for Janet, she trembled so that she could hardly make herself heard.

'Well, after that we are going out of England for some time; perhaps rather a long time. I have no one to live in my house—I don't know yet what I shall do with it in the end, but it must remain as it is for some time; and Mr. and Mrs. Bramble will stay in it as they do now for the present. Now, what I thought of was this—if you and Janet would kindly occupy it while I am away—a year, perhaps, or so—it would be a great favour, and take ever so much responsibility off my hands. It is a nice place, you know, with good air and open space all around, and the park, and its own little patch of ground; and I think you would find it a pleasant change. Janet would like it, I am sure.' She looked from one to the other with half-shy eagerness.

'You are very kind,' Robert said; 'but I am afraid one must keep near one's work.'

'Oh, but I have thought of all that. We are not so stupid about business affairs, we women, Mr. Charlton, as you think us—are we, Janet?' Of course I know that people couldn't be expected to find you out in a little house hidden away among trees. But our idea—Mr. Fielding's and mine—was to look you out a place in one of the streets quite near where you could have your studio or workroom, or whatever you like to

call it, and where you could go during the day, and Janet too; and you could have your name up, and you would get no end of work there, Mr. Fielding thinks. In fact, he says that an artist of your skill is quite thrown away in a place like this. In that other end of the town he is sure you would soon get a splendid lot of work, and you would grow rich, Janet and you, even before we came back, perhaps.'

'It's very kind of Mr. Fielding to think of us poor people,' Robert said; 'we are very much obliged to him.'

Janet could only sob out, 'Oh, Mrs. Vanthorpe!' and take Gabrielle's hand and press it to her lips. Gabrielle did not understand the repelling tone of the one or the emotion of the other.

'In truth,' she went on, 'we have in our minds just the place for you; we saw it the other day, and it can be had at once—if you will only let me take it for you. Come now, my friends,' she said, going straight to the heart of the matter at once, 'will you not let me do this poor little piece of kindness for you, and help to make me happy—to make me more happy, I mean—or indeed I am so happy myself that I long to bring others in to share it with me. Come, Mr. Charlton, you won't refuse me this pleasure? Janet, you will tell your husband that he need not be quite so independent as to refuse a little trifling bit of kindness from a very sincere friend? I should welcome any mark of friendship from anyone I liked. Why not?'

Charlton walked up and down the room. He could not make up his mind or arrange the strife of his fighting soul in a moment. One inclination was to throw himself on Gabrielle's generosity and confess the whole of the base plot into which he had been entering against her. Another was to reject her offer with bitterness because it came from Fielding, of whom now especially, since Paulina's suggestions, he could hardly think with patience. Perhaps his better inclination might have prevailed. Perhaps he might have yielded to the softening and sweetening influence of Gabrielle's kindness and flung away his miserable morbid hates and spites and owned himself repentant. If he had done so things would have gone differently with him. But at that moment a tap was heard at the door, and Gabrielle sprang to her feet.

'Oh, here is Mr. Fielding,' she said. 'He has just come in time to help me to persuade you.' And she ran herself and opened the door and brought Fielding in. His presence seemed to fill the dull old room with cheerfulness and energy.

'Have you talked over this dreadful old man?' he asked, after the first exchange of salutations. 'Do you know, Gabrielle, how old he is? He is a hundred and ninety years old at least; and Janet is fifteen. He is so old that he grows quite crabbed, and he won't let anyone be pleasant with him. We used to have such arguments, he and I. But he's a good fellow at heart, Gabrielle; and a manly, independent fellow. His failings lean—I wouldn't exactly say to virtue's side, but to the side of a sort of gnarled and rugged wild-growth of virtue.' Fielding rattled on in this way with the object of saving Charlton as long as he could from the embarrassment of having to give an answer or make any acknowledgment.

'You are both very kind, I am sure,' Charlton began. 'We don't well know what to say. We are not very happy at expressing ourselves, Janet and I.'

'Never mind expressing yourselves,' Fielding struck in. 'Eloquence, my dear Charlton, is the gift of men of genius like our friend Lefussis; men born to sway the multitude and the fierce democracy, and all that. It isn't for common men like you and me. All we would ask you now—Gabrielle and I—is just to turn this little affair over in your mind and give it a favourable consideration—you and Janet together. Then you'll tell us another time; not now; we don't want an answer now. I want Janet to have her chance of thinking it over; she has ever so much more sense than you have. We are stupid fellows, we men. When I have a wife, I shall do everything she asks me to do. That is the right way, Janet, don't you think so?'

Fielding could not rouse either of the pair into any show of animation. Gabrielle could not understand how there came to be such a cloud of constraint over them all. The talk of Fielding, even, was evidently only inspired by a forced cheerfulness. Perhaps the manner of the Charltons was owing to excess of gratitude, she thought; but really the favour did not seem by any means great enough to call for such emotion. She would have wished to do a great deal more for them; but this seemed about as much as Charlton would be likely to accept. It only amounted to the lending of Gabrielle's house for some undefined time, and to the setting-up Charlton for a year or two in a West End studio or workroom, where he could have a better chance of making a business and a reputation. Nothing more was said on the subject. They talked for a while; but there was no heart in the talk, somehow. Gabrielle felt depressed.

'We must meet again before—before I leave England,' she

said. 'You will come and see me, Janet; I am staying at Lady Honeybell's now. But if you and your husband will do me the kindness to occupy my little house, then I can see you ever so often, and that would be much better.'

She kissed Janet again, and she was positively alarmed by Janet's pale face and moist eyes, her trembling lips and affrighted, miserable looks.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PAULINA 'AT HOME.'

FROM light of any sort into gloom is usually a depressing change. The gloom of the staircase in any Bolingbroke Place tenement is especially sombre and dispiriting. The light in the Charltons' room was, at all events, sunlight—as much of it as could get in; the slanting sunlight of evening. It ought to have been a depressing thing to pass suddenly from that sun-lighted room to a darksome and mournful staircase, that seemed to tell only of poverty and shabby failure. But our lovers felt only a sense of relief when they emerged from the light into the gloom. Nor was this merely because they were lovers, glad to be alone anywhere, carrying in whatever darkness their own little halo of peculiar light around them. There was something in the very atmosphere of the Charltons now that depressed and dispirited. Even the gladness of lovers felt rebuked and chilled in that sad companionship.

'They seem unhappy,' Gabrielle said as she and Fielding were going down the stairs together.

'I can't quite make Charlton out to-day,' Fielding answered; 'perhaps I can't quite make him out ever. He seems almost always morose and discontented; he works hard, poor fellow, and not much seems to come of it. But this evening he is particularly out of spirits—seems to be like what the Scotch call *fey*.'

'I wish we could do something to make them happy.'

'Perhaps we shall; perhaps he will get into a more reasonable mood; Janet may prevail on him. Gabrielle, you never saw my rooms? You never even looked into them. Come, you must give one glance in now before you go, and leave a memory of brightness and love there. I shall always hold them in my recollection as if they were a shrine, because it was there I lived when I first knew you. I hope to be able to get Lefussis to

take them : they are much better than his ; and if I could only juggle him into some belief that he is to have them on the same terms, and if I could make up the difference without his knowledge——But all these fellows are so ferociously independent, one does not know how to manage them.'

'You talk of ferocious independence, who would not even accept a benefit at the hands of a wife!'

'Well, that's a different thing, don't you see. These are my rooms ; this is the door. Come, you must cross the threshold and consecrate the place for poor old Lefussis. Then he'll find some breath of happiness in the old den that he never will be able to account for to the end of his days. Apparently some one has been lighting my lamp for me. How considerate!'

Fielding opened the door and held it open for Gabrielle too pass in. She had barely crossed the threshold when she saw that there was some one, a woman, already in the room. She did not draw back ; she assumed that it was some servant or caretaker who had been lighting the lamp. She entered the room. The woman turned towards her, and Gabrielle saw that she was in the presence of Paulina Vanthorpe. Paulina was there, without bonnet, or shawl, or cloak, like one at home.

'This is the old den, Gabrielle,' Fielding said as he followed her into the room.

Gabrielle stepped back and laid her hand upon his arm, as if to stay him from going any farther. It flashed across her mind that Paulina was mad. Fielding broke into an exclamation of surprise and anger at seeing the woman there.

'You didn't expect to see me, I know,' Paulina began in her grandest tone. 'No, I am an unwelcome apparition. But I am here, and I propose to stay here.'

'How did you get in here?' Fielding asked sternly. 'I can do nothing for you. You must leave this place.'

Paulina laughed scornfully.

'You had no right to enter my room,' Fielding said.

'Have I not? Yes, but I have, though—and I'll soon show you that I have. Gabrielle Vanthorpe, I am sorry for you. I said I would never harm or annoy you ; and no more I would now, if I could ; but you will know in the end what a service I am doing you, and you will thank me for it one day.'

'What are we to do?' Gabrielle asked in a low tone. 'The poor creature is mad.'

'I don't think it's madness,' Fielding said. 'I fancy it is a different cause. Look here, Mrs. Clarkson——'

'My name is not Clarkson——'

'Well, Vanthorpe, then—whatever you like—it is of no use your coming here and thrusting yourself on me. I can do nothing for you. You have taken your own course, and you know very well that this lady has already been only too kind to you. Why do you continue to annoy and alarm her? What do you want? Why do you come here? What good can you get by such foolery?'

'I have come here because this is my proper home, as you know well. Oh, yes, you are a very clever actor, as I know well, and you can play the part of injured innocence delightfully; but I tell you what—the game is up. I didn't mind until I heard that you were going to get married—married!—and she laughed an hysterical laugh—and I wasn't going to stand that, you know. Oh, no! So the game is up; I'll not play my part in it any more.'

'Come, Gabrielle,' said Fielding; 'this is no place for you.' He now began to be convinced that she was right, and that Paulina's various excitements had ended in madness. 'Come away; and I'll see to this poor thing afterwards. Come, Gabrielle.'

'Come, Gabrielle,' Paulina said, mocking him. 'Come, Gabrielle! But I say, No, Gabrielle. Gabrielle don't leave this room until she hears who you are, and what a trap she was near falling into. Gabrielle, do you know who that man is?'

'Yes,' Gabrielle answered quietly; 'I do.' Somehow it seemed to her now that Paulina was not mad.

'Are you going to marry him?'

'Oh, yes; I hope so.'

'You can't!' Paulina screamed, suddenly changing her tone for one of wild excitement. 'He has a wife already! I am his wife. He is my husband. His name is not Fielding. He is your own brother-in-law, Philip Vanthorpe!'

She screamed the words at Gabrielle. Her face, white with excitement, was close to Gabrielle's face. The whole scene, the suddenness, the presence and the words of the furious woman—all these were too much for Gabrielle, and for the first time in her life she succumbed to the heroine's immemorial weakness. She seemed to hear the sound of a strange singing in her ears, the ceiling and floor of the room appeared to be in motion around her, and the whole world seemed to be falling on her; and then, at the acme of this tumult of odd sensations, there was a sudden sweet sense of ease and relief; and, in short, she fainted. She would have fallen on the floor if it had not been that she was

still leaning on Fielding's arm; and he caught her up and held her as if she were a child.

'Look here'—he spoke to Paulina in a low tone, suffused with passion—'*you* stay here. If anything happens to *her*, I'll come back and kill you!'

He carried Gabrielle in his arms out of the room. In all his alarm for her, and with her for a burden, he contrived to get one hand free to take the key from the inside of the door, to draw the door after him, and to lock it on the outside. He had locked Paulina in. He had one distinct purpose in his mind: if any harm came to Gabrielle through that woman's means, he would come back and kill her. She was locked in there meanwhile as a hostage and a prisoner.

Even the intrepid Paulina felt her heart fail her as she heard the key turn on the outside after his words of terrible warning. 'He would do it, too,' she thought. She could not help liking him all the better for it.

Fielding, for all his burden, literally ran up the stairs until he got to the Charltons' room, and there he knocked loudly at the door and called, 'Janet! Charlton! Janet!' until Charlton and Janet both opened the door, and then he staggered into the room.

'She has fainted, Janet,' he said in rapid tones, but with a marvellous composure. 'Some water, please. I'll lay her here on the sofa, and you will see to her, Janet. She has been frightened.'

Janet knelt on the ground beside Gabrielle and began to touch her forehead with cold water.

'Open the window, Robert,' she told her husband, who looked like one affrighted near to death; 'we must let a thorough draught come to her. If you would keep a little away, Mr. Fielding; we mustn't crowd her, please.'

The little woman was entirely mistress of the situation. The men only seemed out of place and in her way. She looked round kindly on Fielding, and said, in the tone of one who reassures a frightened child:

'It's nothing, Mr. Fielding; she will be well in half a moment.'

Fielding gave vent to a deep sigh of relief. He could have embraced Janet in the fervour of his gratefulness.

Janet was right. Hardly half a minute passed away before Gabrielle came to herself again. Her first sensation was a sort of humiliation at the thought that she had fainted when perhaps her lover was in some trouble or danger. Her first thought

was of him; a pang of remorse, as if she had deserted him. She sat up suddenly and looked round for him. For a moment she did not know where she was; but before she recovered her senses clearly enough to recognise the Charltons she saw Fielding. She gave a little cry of joy and stretched out her hand to him. Fielding knelt on the ground beside her and caught her hand and pressed it again and again to his lips.

'I was foolish to be frightened in such a way,' she said in a low, fond tone to him; 'but I am quite happy now as you are with me.' A whole story of love and confidence was told with fullest expression in the words. Fielding felt as if his heart might burst with gladness.

'Oh—Janet!' Gabrielle said, recognising her; 'I did not know that I was here with you. I have been making rather a foolish exhibition of myself, Mr. Charlton; I never fainted before; I never thought people fainted except in novels.'

She was not saying anything about the cause of her alarm. Fielding wondered whether the shock to her nerves had been so great as to drive away for the time all recollection of what had happened before her faint. To Janet the whole thing was a mystery. Robert had his suspicions, and felt very miserable and cowardly.

Suddenly Gabrielle said very quietly:

'You were right, my friend'—she often spoke to him in this way, for the sake of that first time when, not having courage yet to use a closer and dearer expression, she had called her newly-confessed lover 'my friend'—'yes, you were right about that woman; and I was wrong. She is bad; there is no good in her. But she cannot trouble us much—can she, Clarkson?' She looked down into his eyes with such love and confidence that Clarkson almost felt his own eyes grow wet. Oh, what a moment that would have been for him if he were conscious of any secret thing that ought to come between him and that love and faith!

'She can give us no trouble,' he said, with pride as well as tenderness in his voice. 'Some little annoyance, I suppose. She is capable of anything in certain moods; and she is shameless; but we shall soon get rid of her. Listen: Charlton and Janet too. This thing will have to come out one time or other, and of course it need not be any secret even now from you two. That woman, Paulina Vanthorpe—I dare say you have heard of her—is getting up some foolery to annoy me. She insists that I am not myself at all, as the song says, but that I am Philip Vanthorpe and her husband.'

Janet broke into an inarticulate sound of pain and shame. The fact that this was no news to her made her feel as if she were a party to the conspiracy. Robert Charlton muttered something about its being very strange; very strange indeed. Fielding did not notice the manner of either. But Gabrielle did. It concerned her lover, all this story; and she had keen eyes for anything that seemed to imply a doubt of him.

Characteristically, she leaped to a conclusion.

'Did you know anything of this, Mr. Charlton?' she asked, with lighting eyes. She suddenly remembered some former talk of his about Fielding.

'I had heard something of it,' Charlton answered slowly, and without venturing to meet her looks.

'Had you heard of it, Janet?' Gabrielle asked.

'Oh, Mrs. Vanthorpe!'—Janet turned imploringly to Gabrielle—'forgive me; do, do forgive me; I had heard it; but I didn't dare to say anything.'

'I forbade my wife to speak of it, madam,' Robert said, with an awkward effort at firmness; 'it wasn't a thing to talk about—at least, until something certain came to be known of it.'

'Then you know this woman, Charlton?' Fielding said; and he turned on Charlton with so stern an expression that poor Janet gave a little moan of alarm.

'I have known her—yes; that is, I have met her;' Charlton said. 'She spoke of this matter.'

'You knew of it, and you didn't tell me—or tell this lady?' Fielding said, pointing to Gabrielle. 'I shouldn't have expected that of you, Charlton.'

'I wasn't at liberty to speak.'

Fielding shrugged his shoulders:

'Well, you are at liberty to speak to that woman below, I suppose—as she seems to be a friend of yours. Very good; then, take this key with which I have locked your friend in my room. I told her why I locked her in there, and she can tell you if she likes. Let her out, and tell her she can go where she pleases, and say what she pleases; and that the sooner she proclaims her story to the four corners of London, the better I shall be pleased. She will have to go on with it now—tell her that. Tell her, too, that I will never see her or speak to her again except in the presence of a good many witnesses and under the authority of a criminal court. Tell her that, Charlton; and read up the laws relating to conspiracy meanwhile, and see what you make of them.' Fielding flung the key upon the table.

'Come, Gabrielle,' he said, 'this is no place for you.'

An imploring look from Janet's eyes met him.

'Was this well done, Janet?' he asked.

'Oh, Mr. Fielding! oh, Mrs. Vanthorpe!' the poor Janet pleaded; 'you would not blame me if you only knew; I would have died rather than do anything to annoy Mrs. Vanthorpe. I would, indeed.'

'I do believe you, Janet,' Gabrielle said kindly.

'And so do I, Janet,' Fielding said, with his habitual good-nature shining again in his eyes. 'You are a good and true woman, and I don't believe any harm of you.'

'Nor I of you, Mr. Fielding,' Janet declared with courageous fervour.

'Thank you, Janet. I do thank you really.'

'You all look on me as if I was a wretch and a villain and I don't know what all,' Charlton said, with tremulous lips. 'What have I done? How was I to know that the woman's story wasn't true?—how am I to know it now?'

'Ah, just so!' Fielding said contemptuously. 'Come, Gabrielle.'

Gabrielle was only too willing to go. Janet stopped the way for a moment.

'Won't you shake hands with me, Mrs. Vanthorpe, before you go? I should not feel quite so miserable if you did.'

Gabrielle drew the poor little woman towards her and kissed her on the forehead. She did not speak a word.

Fielding held out his hand to Janet. Gabrielle was already at the door. Charlton came up to Fielding and said, in a voice hardly audible for passion:

'Hadn't you better kiss her too? I dare say she would like it well enough.'

He was standing in Fielding's way. The young man caught him by the collar and flung him aside; tossed him out of his path as if he were some wretched bundle of rags. Fielding did not even look back to see whether he had fallen, or what he was likely to do. 'Come, Gabrielle,' he said once more; and giving her his hand, he conducted her down the dark-some stairs. The evening had now gathered in, and all was gloom. As they passed the door of Fielding's room, they did not stop a moment or say a word about its present inmate. But on the threshold of the old house itself they stood for a moment.

'Look back upon it, Gabrielle,' Fielding said. 'It was here, just on this spot, I saw you for the first time; but I don't want ever to see it again. To-day I asked you to look in on my old

place and consecrate it. It has been desecrated since then; and I don't wish ever to see it again.'

'Still, I shall always love it,' said Gabrielle, 'because I first saw you there. I think I must have loved you even that first time—if I had only known.'

'Then—and now?'

'Ah! now, of course, I do know it. But there is nothing wonderful in that. It was strange, though—was it not, my friend?—that we should both have felt so suddenly drawn towards each other that very first time?'

'And you trust me always?' His voice had a tremor in it.

'Only try me,' was Gabrielle's quiet answer.

'Ah,' he said cheerily, 'you are a companion to go tiger-hunting with. The tiger has appeared, Gabrielle, and you are not inclined to run away. Come! shall we walk once or twice round this old square, in memory of the day when we walked round it before, and you asked me about poor Phil Vanthorpe, and you told me you were resolved to bring Wilberforce and myself together again?'

'Yes; and I told you that I would always be a friend to my friend.'

'You did.'

They walked round the little square, keeping on the strip of flags near the railings. They walked for a while without speaking. Gabrielle had not asked Fielding one single question about Paulina and her story. He understood her silence. She disdained to say a word which might even suggest that she needed any assurance of Paulina's falsehood from him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

'PERCHANCE, IAGO, I WILL NE'ER GO HOME.'

ROBERT CHARLTON had not fallen when Fielding, giving way to that one burst of temper, flung him aside. He only staggered a little and nearly came against Janet, who shrank from him and drew herself away into a corner of the room and sat in silence. She had heard his words to Fielding, and she despised him for them. She might have been in terror for herself. It was not easy to count on what a man like Robert might do at such a moment, and now she was alone with him. But somehow, she did not think about her personal safety; she had hardly any sense of fear. It did not seem to matter much what

happened to her or to him now. They never could be the same; she never could love him any more. He had shown himself basely ungrateful to Gabrielle; he had helped that detestable woman in her vile conspiracy; he had been in constant communication with her before she, Janet, ever knew that there was such a creature in existence. Now he had humiliated and insulted his wife before Mr. Fielding; he had disgraced her almost as much as if he had publicly branded her with shame. If it pleased him to kill her now—why, let him do so, she said to herself. She did not see much use in living any longer, since it had come to this.

Still, she had a sort of dulled curiosity as to what her husband would do or say first. He appeared to be very quiet.

'Light the lamp,' he said. 'And get the other lamp; and then take that key off the table and go downstairs and let that woman out.'

'I'll not go near her,' Janet said, without looking at him.

'Are you afraid of her? Do you think she would bite you?'

'No; I am not afraid of her; but I will have nothing to do with her. And if she comes up here, Robert, I'll go out of the place. Mind that. I told you I would not have any more of her.'

Robert looked up at her angrily. She was trembling; but she was not afraid. At least, she was driven to desperation.

'I don't want her up here,' he said, 'any more than you do; but you will please to remember that this place is mine. Any-one I choose shall come into it. I am the master; not you.'

He took up the lamp and the key himself, and he went out of the room. He knew now that Janet despised him, and that she would always do so. But he hardly cared much for that now. He did not care whether she saw Fielding throw him aside or not. He too was desperate. He was not even afraid of Paulina, although one who proposed to confront that impetuous prisoner at such a moment might well feel some alarm. He turned the key in the lock and threw the door broadly open. Paulina stood at the farther end of the room, with her back to the chimney-piece and her hand clinging to Fielding's heavy bronze lamp. Her attitude was like that of some furious *petroleuse* on whom the Versaillists had come, and who turned in despair for one last effort at resistance or revenge.

Charlton was in no humour for admiring picturesque attitudes. If he had been, he might have seen something in the stand and the look of Paulina that would have supplied a bold artist with a good idea for a picture. Paulina had no shawl or cloak, and all the proportions of her really fine figure were

clearly seen by the light of the lamp which stood before her on a small table, and on which she kept her hand. Her eyes flashed what Carlyle calls 'hell-fire.' Her face, free for once of paint—at least, of fresh paint—was livid. The ravages of time as they showed in the dim light were only lines that lent to her face a certain wasted appearance of severity and of something like dignity. Her too full lips were firmly pressed together, and gave the idea of sensuous strength collecting all its energy for some last ordeal. Clytemnestra, one might have thought, must have looked somewhat like this after the deed was done and she stood prepared to defy the consequences.

But Paulina's words were not by any means in keeping with the dignity of Clytemnestra. When she saw who was coming she took her hand from the heavy lamp to which she had been holding as her sole available weapon of defence, as Byron's Olympia clung to the great golden crucifix.

'Is it only you? Ain't there any more of you?'

Her whole manner collapsed with the change in the condition of things, and she was the vulgar Paulina Vanthorpe again.

'There's nobody else,' Charlton said sullenly, but a little relieved nevertheless to find that the Clytemnestra attitude was not meant for him. As he was coming down the stairs he had begun to think that Paulina might, perhaps, be in the habit of carrying a dagger in her garter ready for any emergency.

'Where's *he*?' she asked.

'Gone away with *her*. He sent me to let you know.'

'I am sorry the little woman was frightened,' Paulina said. 'She's a dear little angel, and that's a fact; and I'm awfully sorry to have to give her any pain. But in war, you know, she added, assuming her grandiose way, 'women live got to suffer.'

'Besides,' Charlton said very slowly, 'if he is your husband already, you are only doing her a great service, you know.'

'Oh, bother!' was the somewhat unsatisfactory answer of the unsympathetic Paulina.

'Is he your husband?' Charlton asked sharply.

'Didn't you hear me say he was?'

'And you are prepared to prove all this—that he is Philip Vanthorpe, and all the rest of it?'

'You bet I am.'

'Remember,' Charlton said, with slow emphasis, 'it will be easy for him to show that he is not Philip Vanthorpe if he really isn't. You are running a very serious risk. He says he is determined to have the whole thing out now.'

Paulina laughed.

'Why, of course he must have the whole thing out. You don't suppose she is going to marry him until he can prove that he ain't Philip Vanthorpe and my husband? Not likely. How is he going to prove that, I want to know? I've got him in a hole, you'll see. He can't find any evidences nearer than New Orleans anyhow, if he can find any there. By that time nobody can tell what may happen. We'll have a fine bit of fun, I tell you. I've played hell-and-tommy already with the lot of them.'

At that moment Charlton felt as certain that her story was all a falsehood and a concoction as he felt certain of his own existence. For a moment he was on the verge of a resolve to denounce her and leave her. She saw, perhaps, his wavering purpose.

'Now,' she said, 'you and I have got to go to work and fix things. I ain't much of a literary character myself, and you can use the pen much better than me. You must write a letter for me to old Mrs. Leven, and I'll copy it out the best I can. We want to tell her that her son's alive, and expose a villain, and that sort of thing—you know.'

'Do you know,' Charlton asked significantly, 'what you are liable to, if you fail in this? Do you know there are laws to punish; and he won't spare you?'

She faced him suddenly with blazing eyes.

'Man! do you know anything of women? Do you know anything even of your own little wife? Don't you know that we never care for anything that may happen when our blood is up? What do I care for laws and punishments? If I burst up this marriage business, and have my revenge on the pack of them, they may send me to Botany Bay if they like; I don't care.'

Paulina was not well-informed as to the changes that had taken place with regard to punishment by transportation.

'Yes, but if I assist you, I may be accused of conspiracy—he talked of prosecution for conspiracy.'

'What have you got to do with it? Don't I tell you my story, and ain't you impressed with the truth of it?—and what conspiracy is there in that? You are an honest man yourself, and you believe the word of an honest woman—where's the harm in that? Why, even supposing I wasn't an honest woman, what blame could there be to you for believing me? You wouldn't be the first man that was taken in by a woman, I suppose?'

He hesitated. 'I don't quite see my way,' he said.

'You're a coward,' she replied fiercely. 'You haven't the spirit of a man or of a cat. You are afraid of him—although I told you enough about him to make even a coward pluck up a little bit of courage. Lord! what awful cowards you men are! and we women ain't afraid of anything, once our blood's up. Your little wife seems as meek as a mouse now; see if she doesn't fly in your face if you carry things too far. I can see already that she won't stand much more of you and me hugger-muggering together, and of our trying to do anything to vex my fine Master Fielding, as he calls himself.'

The wretched Charlton mentally acknowledged with bitter pangs that there was truth in what she was now saying.

'Anyhow,' Paulina said, 'I've got you in my power, and I mean to make use of you. You have gone a good deal too far to turn back now, let me tell you. You have been in with me from the very first. Lord! how long is it since you first did me the honour to call on me in my modest abode on the Surrey side? Come along; you and me against any two. Sit down and make yourself comfortable; we'll prepare a rattling good letter for my beloved mother-in-law. We'll send a bombshell in among them. Won't the old Major look funny!'

'Are you going to stay here?' Charlton asked in amazement, as he saw Paulina setting chairs, and bringing out pens, ink, and paper with the air of one who is thoroughly at home.

'Of course I am. Ain't this my husband's place of abode? Ain't possession nine points of the law? It will be a strong card in my hand that I have settled down in my husband's rooms, and that I refuse to go out of them. What's the fellow in the papers, *Punch* and that—that says, in French, you know, "Here I am, and here I stick"? Well, I'm him, as far as that's concerned. Here I am, and here I stick.'

'But the people who are in charge of this house?'

'I'll tell them. These are Mr. Fielding's apartments, ain't they? Very good—ain't I Mr. Fielding's wife?'

But if they don't believe you?'

'You'll tell them it's all right,' said Paulina composedly. 'You are known to be a respectable person, and you'll say it's all right. That will be enough. Come, don't bother any more, but go ahead and write. Don't you see it's no end of points in my favour to write to the old lady from this very place, and to have the old Major and her come over and find me here?'

In a shuddering sort of way Robert admired her courage and her coolness. 'If one must be bad,' he thought, 'it is some

thing at least to have nerves that are equal to one’s purposes.’ For his own part, he gave himself up now to her plans. Some of her words had made him morally, though not physically, as reckless as herself.

‘I say,’ Paulina suddenly exclaimed, ‘can’t we have something to drink? I’m awfully thirsty. I have money enough, if you’ll send out for some brandy. And, I say, hadn’t we better have the little wife down here;—or lets go up to her? I don’t think it seems quite proper, you know, Charlton, for you and me to be alone together in this sort of way. People might be making remarks. Lord! the world is all scandal.’

‘I have brandy upstairs,’ Charlton said sullenly; ‘and I’ll go and ask Janet if she will come down, or we go up.’

He went upstairs to Janet. She was sitting in a chair at the window looking out upon the cheerless narrow street. The light of the lamp was very dim. She was not working. Her hands lay listlessly on her lap. She looked blankly round as her husband entered, but she said nothing. Something made him anxious to propitiate her now. He put on an air of good-humour.

‘That’s an extraordinary woman below, Janet,’ he said. ‘I don’t quite know what to make of her; but she persists in her story, and declares she can prove every word of it. She is going to remain in the rooms below; they are her husband’s, she says, and she has a right. Of course that’s no affair of ours. All she wants me to do for her now is to write to Mrs. Leven and tell her story—and then let the Levens call on her for proofs. Of course I’m not in any way responsible for that. If she fails, she must take the consequences. But I think you had better come down, Janet; or let us have her up here. It would be more proper.’

‘Robert, I’ll not go near her,’ Janet said, with a white face and lips that trembled. ‘I’ll not go near her, and I’ll not stay in this room if she comes in. She is a vile woman; she is making up a lie, and she knows it—and you know it too, in your heart, Robert. Yes, you do—and you are helping her and prompting her all the same. I’m not very clever, but I can see that there isn’t a word of truth in her story. I am ashamed of you that you would have anything to do with such a wretch as that.’

‘Your partiality for Mr. Fielding blinds you a little,’ he said, with a sneer, and throwing away the pitiful olive-branch of peace he had been pretending to hold out. ‘Has he been here since? I wonder you are not jealous of Mrs. Vanthorpe, as he is so fond of her.’

She looked at him with a flush coming over her cold face. She made one or two efforts to speak, but could not get the words out. At last she said :

‘You have spoken in that way too often, Robert ; I have put up with a great deal ; I’ll not bear with any more of that.’

He muttered some bitter reply, and then he got a decanter with some brandy in it and went downstairs to write the letter for Paulina. He wrote the letter, which was all Paulina wanted him to do for her cause just then. She got rid of him soon, and he was glad to go. Paulina was very anxious to maintain every appearance of the strictest propriety.

When he left her, he did not go upstairs. He went out into the streets and wandered for hours, shamed, miserable, and hopeless, hating everyone, and burning with the conviction that all earth and humanity and the destinies had done him bitter wrong. When, long after midnight, he returned to his rooms, they were a solitude. Janet was gone. She had not left a written word behind her to say wherefore she had gone, or whither. But the rooms were empty ; Janet was gone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘TIS A QUICK LIE : ’T WILL AWAY AGAIN.’

MAJOR LEVEN sat in his study annotating a Blue-book and marking passages for extract from it. He was making up a formidable case against the Foreign Office, and he was full of the present effort and the joy of the coming strife. Suddenly his wife broke in upon him. Her appearance in that room was unusual. Mrs. Leven always considered it a part of the formal dignity of her position as a wife not to show any familiarity with the occupations of her husband, and not to follow him into his study. She thought it became man and wife to be habitually apart. Therefore, when Major Leven saw her enter, he knew that there was matter in it. She really looked alarmed and agitated to a degree that was uncommon indeed with her.

‘George, look at that letter—read that !’

She handed him Paulina’s letter, just come to hand. He read it over, growing more and more perturbed as he read. ‘I don’t understand this,’ he said, and he applied himself to read it all over again. It was not very long. Mrs. Leven sat down and waited.

'Stuff!' Major Leven exclaimed at last, throwing the epistle contemptuously on the table.

'You don't believe it, George?'

'Not a word of it. It's all rubbish—it's a weak invention of the enemy,' he added, under the erroneous impression that he was quoting from the writings of William Shakespeare. 'Fancy this young fellow being your son, Philip Vanthorpe!'

'I don't know, George; my mind misgave me the first moment I saw him. I disliked him from the first, although then I knew no reason why.'

'But, good heavens! Constance, you don't really mean to say that you think your dislike of him is evidence that he must be your son?'

'I do,' Mrs. Leven answered solemnly. 'I have reason to dislike my son—good reason; and the moment I first saw this man, I disliked him. George, I believe this woman's story.'

Major Leven rose, and walked up and down the room. He was distressed by this evidence of implacable and what seemed to him unnatural feeling. He could understand hatred of a wicked minister or a plotting despot; but he could not understand private hates; above all, he could not understand a mother's hatred for her son. He did not lecture her or scold her. They had married in such an impulsive way, and they had got on together so quietly, and as it were by virtue of a tacit compromise, making the best of the thing when done, that they hardly felt like husband and wife. Mrs. Leven's sentiments, however much they pained him, seemed to Leven like the talk of some wrong-headed lady of his acquaintance which he could only regret and mildly deprecate, but for which he was not responsible, and which he could not attempt to control.

'At any rate, Constance,' he said, with some anger in his tone, 'I can tell you that your instincts and presentiments in this case set you quite astray. This young man is the son of old Sir Jacob Fielding, and no one else. I knew him the very moment I first set eyes on him. I'm never mistaken in recognising faces.'

'I always felt a doubt of him,' Mrs. Leven said decisively. 'Only the other day I told that mad girl myself that I thought that young man was just such another as my son Philip, and that I didn't believe he was Sir Wilberforce Fielding's brother.'

'What do you propose to do?' he asked abruptly.

'I propose to do nothing, George.'

'Hadn't you better send for this young man?'

'No, George. Why should I send for him? If he is not

my son, I don't want to see him; if he is my son, I want a] the less to see him. I have nothing to do with the whole affair. But you, perhaps, who think more of that mad girl than I do—you might see her and advise her for her own sake to be careful now. She is standing on the brink of a precipice. If this man is my unfortunate son——'

'But he isn't, Constance, I can assure you.'

'Whoever he is, this woman claims him for her husband.'

'Yes, that's quite true,' Major Leven acknowledged, in much distress. 'Gabrielle must be seen at once. This is a terrible business; I don't believe a word of it; but still—one can't be too careful; and she is so impetuous, and of course would believe anything *he* said, poor child. It's perfectly awful all this. I know it's only a pack of lies. Good God, what a world it is! I'll go and see her at once.'

He put away his Blue-book, not without a half-sigh. He was just about to be very busy, and his heart was in the work. He had only got fairly into it; and Major Leven's thoughts in general moved a little slowly. When he was interrupted in any piece of work, he did not very easily find his place in it again. It is probable that in his righteous wrath against the inventors of false tales just then there was mingled a certain personal resentment because of his interrupted task. But he put the Blue-Book aside and started forth to seek Gabrielle.

Soon the story was spread all through the little circle of which Lady Honeybell may be called the centre. It did not get talked about or even known very much among Lord Honeybell's friends. Lord Honeybell was then much engrossed by questions of local government and the adjustment of the burdens on land, and he had only a very vague idea as to who Gabrielle Vanthorpe was. He knew she was some favourite of his wife's, but he was not clear as to the difference, if any, between her and Miss Elvin; and when his wife, seeking for his advice as a practical man, had made that clear to him, he got it into his head that Professor Elvin, whom he had seen once or twice, was Fielding; and he bewildered Lady Honeybell by telling her that he really did *not* think that man could be a gentleman.

Four persons, besides Gabrielle, resolutely declined to believe Paulina's story. These were Sir Wilberforce Fielding, Major Leven, Mr. Lefussis, and Janet. Sir Wilberforce turned a deaf ear to the whole affair. He never could be got to say more than 'My brother Clarkson? Why, of course, he is my brother Clarkson. Stuff and nonsense! stuff and nonsense!' Major Leven merely repeated that he knew Clarkson the first moment

he saw him to be old Sir Jacob Fielding's son. Lefussis declared that Mr. Clarkson Fielding was a gentleman, and a man of honour, 'and my esteemed friend,' and that he would take his word against the oaths of all the painted ladies the Haymarket or other place could turn out. In the mean time, he made it a point to leave his card on Fielding about twice a day, in token of undiminished confidence and regard.

But there was not much in the instinctive conviction of Mr. Lefussis to satisfy sceptics; and on the whole the testimony of Sir Wilberforce made rather for Paulina's story than against it. For Sir Wilberforce had often said that he should never have known Clarkson Fielding for his brother; and this very fact helped to make Major Leven's testimony of little value. How could Major Leven, it was pertinently asked, have seen so striking a likeness to old Sir Jacob Fielding where Sir Jacob's eldest son could see none? This criticism told very effectively with many persons. It had in reality about as much value in it as the argument that it is impossible John can read the figures on the steepleclock with his naked eye, when James has to put on spectacles to make them out. It may have chanced to some of the readers of this story to revisit after many years of absence some place familiar to their youth. Such persons will, perhaps, have observed, as this writer has had occasion to do, that among the old acquaintances whom one rejoins there are two sets of what may be called extremists in the matter of recognition. There are those who know you at the first glance and positively affirm that they cannot see the slightest change in you; and there are those who declare that they should never have known you again, and that they cannot even now trace the slightest resemblance in your features and manner to the friend whom they knew so well long ago. The writer is personally acquainted with two distinct cases in which the identity of a brother was doubted by those who were nearest of kin to him, and ought to have known him best, while mere friends recognised him at once, and wondered that there could be any doubt about the matter.

The sceptics in the case of Clarkson Fielding knocked all argument down by reminding people triumphantly that Sir Wilberforce never recognised the man who called him brother, and simply took him on trust. 'You know what sort of man Sir Wilberforce is,' some sagacious persons said. 'His mind is all taken up with drain-pipes and plans of ventilation. If you or I went boldly up to him and claimed to be his brother, he would have said, 'Dare say you are. How are you? Hope you are well.' Some ladies added that 'the young man was presented

to Sir Wilberforce by that pretty Mrs. Vanthorpe, and Sir Wilberforce was awfully in love with her. He would have taken the Claimant for his brother, if Mrs. Vanthorpe had only asked him.'

Janet, indeed, might have given some evidence that would have borne more directly on the question. She could have told how she had seen Paulina and her husband making up the case against Fielding time after time, and that she had noticed how adroitly Paulina modified her statement, improved, rounded it, and reduced it to symmetry and harmony in accordance with the slightest suggested hints or questions of Robert Charlton. But Janet could hardly be called upon to give testimony even in private bearing thus distinctly, if not directly, against her own husband; and in any case not many persons would have relied upon her judgment or her powers of observation; and many would assuredly have said that she was now furious against her husband, and glad to say anything to his discredit.

On the whole, then, the case stood thus as it was presented to the outer world. Only one person professed to have recognised the man calling himself Clarkson Fielding as the son of old Sir Jacob Fielding. Sir Wilberforce did not recognise him. Gabrielle Vanthorpe was convinced, when she saw him first, that he was not Clarkson Fielding, but Philip Vanthorpe. She had sent for him to come to her house under the full conviction that he was the brother of her dead husband. Every act done by him since his coming to London was more consistent with the assumption that he was Philip Vanthorpe than that he was Clarkson Fielding. He had always carefully kept away from Sir Wilberforce Fielding until Gabrielle undertook to bring them together, and insisted on doing so. Then, with her to stand his sponsor on the first introduction, he had ventured to go. He had come between Sir Wilberforce and his intended marriage; for of course, as the knowing people said, it would never suit him to have the owner of the property married. He had been known by various names in various parts of the world; but they were names that would rather have served as a means of identification than a means of disguise to Clarkson Fielding. He had been known as Mr. Clarkson; he had been known as Mr. Selbridge. But Clarkson was the Christian name of the younger Fielding; Selbridge was his mother's name. What young man endeavouring to conceal his identity for any purpose would have taken these names? But they would have served the purpose of Philip Vanthorpe admirably; and Philip Vanthorpe had confessedly been a close friend of Clarkson Fielding. Again, it

was certain that Clarkson Fielding had quarrelled with his father in the first instance, because Sir Jacob had imposed the name of Clarkson on him. Was it likely that he would make the name more conspicuously than ever his own?

The balance of opinion, therefore, leaned heavily against Clarkson Fielding and in favour of Paulina's story. Paulina, too, had the great advantage of telling it for the most part in her own way. She did not say much about the hostility Fielding had always displayed towards her, and the manner in which he had endeavoured to rescue Gabrielle from any companionship with her. When she had to touch on all this part of the case, she explained it her own way, after a fashion we have already described, and which, indeed, had been suggested by one or two questions from Charlton.

Gabrielle, of course, never spoke on the subject to any but her most intimate friends, who were very few. One of these was Lady Honeybell.

'I think, Lady Honeybell, I had better go back to my own house while all this is going on; it is my own house still.'

'Why should you do that, my dear young woman? You are better here, I think. It would never do for you to be living alone in that way while all this, as you say, is going on. No, no; I have got you here, and here for the present I mean to keep you. I'll do what your mother would do, if you had one.'

'But I am afraid I bring annoyance on you and disturb you; and then, Lady Honeybell, I am sometimes not quite sure that you are entirely with me in this.'

'Entirely with you in what?'

'Well, of course I can't blame you; I can't wonder; you don't know him as I do; you can't feel to him as I do—'

'Eh, surely no,' Lady Honeybell gravely admitted.

'And I am sometimes afraid that you join with the people who think I am unwise and doing wrong, and who don't believe in him as I do—as I do.'

'My dear,' Lady Honeybell answered soothingly, 'I should be anxious to believe everything you believed and to like everyone you liked, especially at a time like this. But it is quite enough for me in this case that Sir Wilberforce Fielding believes in this young man, and that Major Leven is positive on the subject. I put you out of the question—your opinions, I mean; you are not in a condition to judge. But I am satisfied with the declarations of these men; I don't think the word of that woman counts for anything. But still I think you are bound in duty to yourself to be very careful how you act; and you are not at all

the woman to be cautious in anything. That is why I am glad I have you safely here. We must have no marryings and no engagements while this thing is unsettled.'

'If he thought I had any doubt of him——' Gabrielle began, with tears in her eyes.

'But, my dear young woman, goodness gracious! how could he possibly think you had any doubt of him? Why, you go on to him as though you thought ten thousand times more of him than ever.'

'So I do, Lady Honeybell,' Gabrielle said warmly.

Gabrielle sickened at the whole scandal. She was made miserable by the thought of her lover being called on to prove anything to anybody. It was enough for her that he said 'This is so;' she would have had it enough for all the world besides. At least, she would have wished that he and she could act with absolute indifference to the opinion of the rest of the world. What did it matter to them, she often thought, if a wicked woman chose to invent monstrous lies? She was hardly patient with Major Leven, for all his kindness, when he came to implore her to have the whole scandal disposed of at once for all before she entered into any engagement with Fielding. She was almost inclined to complain of Fielding himself, because he was evidently determined to act as Major Leven advised her to act, and have the whole thing disposed of before he allowed Gabrielle to stand too far committed to him in the eyes of the world. Fielding did not very often come to see her these days. They were very melancholy days to Gabrielle. The sweet sanctity of their love seemed to her to have been cruelly profaned by all this vulgar, hideous controversy, this prospect of fending and proving. These days we now speak of were very few. At an ordinary time they would have passed so unnoticed away that before long Gabrielle would have ceased to have any idea of their number. But now they seemed to make up a whole season of melancholy, impatience, anxiety, and pain.

Gabrielle was distracted from the thought of her own trouble when Mrs. Bramble came one day to tell her that Janet was with her; that she had left her husband, and declared she would not go back to him. He had been very bad to her, Mrs. Bramble said; although Janet had not explained to her exactly what it was all about.

'She hasn't cared about him this long time,' Mrs. Bramble went on to say. 'I knew it, though she wouldn't let on even to me. I know he must have been very bad to turn her so against him. She used to be fond of him once; and she's such

a good girl. I wish she had never seen him; and so does she now.'

'I'll go and see her,' Gabrielle said. 'Perhaps she'll tell me. It seems a dreadful thing her leaving her husband in that way; but I know it can't be Janet's fault. I'll go to her at once.'

But Mrs. Bramble explained that Janet would not see anyone just yet; that she had begged to be left quite alone for the present; and had even said that she could not yet open her mind to Mrs. Vanthorpe. 'And she loves you, ma'am, more than anyone else in the world—now.'

Gabrielle was not astonished to find that something had gone wrong between Janet and her husband. She thought with melancholy reflection of the days when first she used to go to see them, and of the schemes she had for making them happy. How many dream-blossoms had she nourished; how few had ripened!

Her heart leaped up with joy one evening when her lover came to see her. He came so seldom now! He was so careful on her account! He kept away almost as if he had some fever in his veins that his mere presence might impart to her. And she—why, if there were such a fever, she would have liked to share it; at least, she would have welcomed the risk rather than lose an hour of his presence. 'I should never do to be a man,' Gabrielle thought: 'I never could be so prudent and considerate even for one I loved.'

'Gabrielle,' Fielding said, 'we begin to see our way at last. We can only meet this thing in one way. Major Leven and I are going out to New Orleans at once. We shall follow the track of poor Philip Vanthorpe, and get among those who knew him and knew me; and then we'll come back and crush this ridiculous story at once. Just now we can't do anything. This unfortunate woman hasn't put herself directly in the way of a prosecution yet; and even if she did, we haven't the means of putting her story completely down. The whole thing is only a farce; but for our own sakes we must allow it to have for the time the proportions of a melodrama.' He said some words of encouragement and love to her; told her how the time would be short until he came back again; put on a cheery face, and declared that he knew she had courage for anything.

Even he was for a moment surprised to see how her eyes lighted and her cheeks got colour. In place of looking depressed, she had become all radiant. She felt as if a burden of stone were raised off her heart. For she too saw her way now. She had formed a resolution, and she was happy.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

‘WE WILL HAVE NO MORE MARRIAGES.’

GABRIELLE was in such good spirits that she was even inclined to trifle a little with her lover’s evident perplexity.

‘Did you ever read any of Plutarch?’ she asked him suddenly.

He was amazed; but he was equal to the occasion, and answered with perfect gravity:

‘Yes, I read a good deal of Plutarch, long ago. Generals and great soldiers of all kinds usually carry copies of Plutarch about with them in their campaigning; so their biographers always tell us. They are the kind of generals who always sleep on little iron bedsteads at home, no matter what splendour may be all around them. I always associate Plutarch with great generals and iron bedsteads.’

‘I found an old translation of Plutarch at home long ago, and I used to be very fond of reading it. I used to like the life of Alexander very much. Didn’t you like the life of Alexander?’

‘Immensely; and also that of Numa Pompilius; to say nothing of Martinus Scriblerus, and Thomas Diafoirus.’

‘No these are not in Plutarch. But do you remember about Alexander and his friend the physician?’

‘I do remember it. But just now I had rather you spoke to me as if I didn’t.’ He knew she had some serious meaning, and he was anxious to get at it as soon as possible.

‘Well, Alexander was sick, and he had a friend a physician, whom he loved and trusted. I am like Alexander in that; I have a friend whom I love and trust——’

She stopped.

‘Tell me the rest,’ Clarkson said.

‘Yes; the physician was to cure him with some draught, and just then Alexander got a secret message warning him that the friend was false and meant to poison him. He read the letter, and he showed it to no one. The physician came with the draught. Alexander looked into his eyes and drank all that was in the cup; and then he showed the letter.’

She stopped again.

‘Yes, Gabrielle?’

‘Oh, don’t you see?’ she asked impatiently. ‘Where would have been the proof of his faith in his friend if he had shown

him the letter and questioned him before he swallowed the draught? Very well, you must let me be Alexander now.'

She held out her hand to him and he pressed it to his lips. He began to understand her little classical allegory.

'Go to New Orleans, my friend,' she said, find out all you can and all you like; prove anything you will for the satisfaction of the world and yourself, if you care about it; but you shall not prove anything for me. No one ever shall say that I waited for any evidence. You must make me your wife before you go, or I will never be your wife at all. Nothing on earth shall make me change from this resolution. If you refuse this proof of my confidence in you, you refuse me.'

What could Fielding do? Was it likely he would refuse this proof of her confidence, or endeavour to reason her into caution? It gave him a feeling of joy and of pride such as he had scarcely had even when first he knew that she loved him. The more likely it was that all her friends and their little world would think her rash, the more he loved her for her trust, and the more he felt that he must for ever be worthy of it. He pledged himself to her in one or two simple words that he would never take one step or travel one mile to prove Paulina's story false until he had made her his wife, who would most of all human beings become a victim if that so-called story were to prove true. He left her that evening happy, proud, and humbled. He was deeply humbled in all his joy and his pride because he could not see how he could ever make himself truly worthy of her. A certain sensation of fear, utterly unknown before to his easy, careless nature, began to take possession of him. Suppose he were to die and leave her—what grief that would be to her! Suppose by some strange concurrence of evil fates he found himself unable to establish his own identity to the satisfaction of all the world? He had read of such things. The controversy about Sebastian of Portugal, dear to our grandmothers who read romances, has never been settled. Suppose falsehood and wickedness were for once to win the day against him and against Gabrielle, and people were to believe that he had wronged beyond measure of words that most generous and trusting woman? Suppose that while he was away in New Orleans, Gabrielle were to die? He tortured himself with vain irrepressible doubts and fears. It is thus with the purest happiness man can have. Like the miser's money, the despot's ill-gotten power, it brings its torturing anxieties with it. We have got it—can we keep it? Is it to be stolen from us—torn from us? Are there not threats and dangers here, there, all around?

Strangely, perhaps, such doubts just now hardly intruded themselves on Gabrielle at all. She had become a different woman since she had made her compact with her lover. She had for some days been looking depressed and spiritless; quite unlike her old self. Now she was all brightness and high spirits again. She feared nothing; distrusted nothing; was satisfied that all would come well with her and her lover. Lady Honeybell was surprised and delighted at the change. The gladness of the young woman touched her. There was a good deal of the sentimental still left in Lady Honeybell's nature, amid much shrewd sense and perhaps a little tendency to flightiness in patronage and favouritism. She found her house made more happy while Gabrielle was there. She was delighted to see Gabrielle in good spirits again; and she set the change down to the fact that Major Leven had frankly taken up Fielding's cause and was about to go with him to New Orleans to find out the evidences of its truth. She had no idea of Gabrielle's resolve, and would have been much alarmed if she had known of it. Her sentiment would never have carried her the length of giving encouragement to the marriage of any woman on such trust as that which seemed to Gabrielle only the rightful tribute to one who really loved a man. Nor would Gabrielle be satisfied with any secret marriage. It was not enough for her that she believed in Fielding and was willing to stake all on her belief. She must have her friends as well to see that she had such implicit faith. Nor would Fielding for his part have consented to any secrecy. He was content to wait, while it was not certain that Gabrielle was willing to give so signal a proof of her faith in him; but now *since* she had declared her resolution he felt that it would be unjust to her to allow of any secrecy about their marriage. The more he thought over it, the more he felt convinced that in no way could the growing scandal be more bravely and wisely met than by his open public marriage with Gabrielle.

Gabrielle felt proud and happy. If anything could have been needed to complete the happiness of her love, it was an opportunity of proving her confidence in her lover; and now even this had come. When Lady Honeybell and almost everyone else at first opposed the idea, and urged her even for the mere form's sake to wait until her lover's identity had been fully established and his character cleared, she was glad that they did so, because their remonstrances made the firmness of her purpose more apparent. Nothing on earth, she declared, should induce her to wait for any proof or evidence. Who proves, doubts, she declared in triumph. She was so happy

then that she instantly fell to thinking she was bound to earn her own happiness by forthwith doing or trying to do something to make others happy. Her thoughts turned to poor Janet Charlton, living her lonely miserable life apart from her husband. Gabriello made up her mind that she would do her best to bring that pair together again. She was sure Robert Charlton must be the one in the wrong. But she was sure too that he had some principle of good in him, and she resolved to seek it out and make her appeal to it. 'She would send for him; he must come to her; she would meet him with confidence, and address herself to his spirit of self-respect and of manhood; she would find out what had happened between Janet and him; and it should go hard if she did not restore them to each other. This should be her apology to the powers above for being happy and for delighting in her happiness.

One day Gabrielle had a visit from Claudia Lemuel. It was long since she had seen the little pessimist; and she was glad to see her now. Claudia came out of pure good-nature, for she had long given up all hopes of Gabrielle as a supporter of any great cause for the advancement of the human race through the remodelling of the social and political laws which deprive woman of her just ascendancy. Nothing could have better proved the ingrained liberality of thought which lived beneath all Claudia's little pedantries than her friendship for Gabrielle, because she could seldom help regarding as a sort of traitress to her sex any woman who openly professed, as Gabrielle did, a great esteem and regard for the creature called man, and was willing to acknowledge in a certain sense his title to supremacy. Curiously enough, Gabrielle had never had an opportunity of doing the smallest kindness for Claudia, who nevertheless liked her greatly; and she had heaped kindness on Miss Elvin, who detested her.

Claudia had heard some rumour about Gabrielle which not a little troubled her. She had some other trouble on her mind of the same sort as well. Gabrielle saw from the first moment of their meeting that something was pressing down the spirit of her friend. The cause of pessimism she supposed was going wrong somehow; or perhaps Mrs. Lemuel had not been lately heard of, and was to be explored for in Africa like another Livingstone.

'And you are going to be married?' Claudia said in tones of deep compassion.

'Yes, Claudia I am going to be married. Won't you congratulate me?'

'I should like you to be happy,' Claudia said meditatively.

'I am sure you will believe I am sincere in that. But I don't know that I ought to congratulate you. That would seem wanting in principle on my part, would it not?'

'Why wanting in principle, Claudia?'

'Well, it is forfeiting a woman's independence to get married. I can't approve of that. I think women would have so much a nobler destiny if they were independent.'

'I have tried independence, Claudia, and I don't know that anything very noble came of it.'

'But there might have been—oh, surely yes, there might have been, if you had but understood your own capabilities in life and exerted them. Pray, Mrs. Vanthorpe, don't think it rude of me if I talk in this way. It is only because I think you have so much capacity for doing good and great things, if you would only try. I don't mind frivolous women getting married; but the really earnest and capable—they ought to keep their independence and their opportunities of doing good. And I suppose you will even change your name?'

'Indeed yes, Claudia—if you mean that I will take *his* name.'

'Well, now, that I do think is a pity,' Claudia said with great earnestness. 'On that point I may argue, may I not?'

'Oh yes, Claudia, by all means. But I am afraid you will find me very wrong-headed and hard to convince. Why should I not take my husband's name? What harm is there in that?'

'It is an acknowledgment of a woman's complete absorption in a man, as if she were never to have any being or any rights separate from him. It is such a confession of inferiority. Why should he not take your name?'

'I really don't know,' Gabrielle said. 'Because it isn't the custom, I suppose. I believe there are places where the men do take their wives, names, to distinguish them from other men. I don't see how it matters either way.'

'Oh yes, Mrs. Vanthorpe, surely yes. For one thing, it is a confession of inferiority; or rather I should say a profession of inferiority; for I don't admit that we are inferior, or can truly confess ourselves to be such. And then it is an untruth. Your name is not his name. The name you got on coming into the world is your name. To assume any other name is to sanction a departure from the truth; it is to give one another encouragement to the falsehoods of our human system. Why, why will women consent to marry!'

Claudia was so bitter against matrimony that Gabrielle could not help fancying there must be some special reason

just then for her bitterness. Could it be that she was only soured in the vulgar way because no one had yet asked her to marry him? Gabrielle thought better of the girl, somehow, than that. In order to turn the talk away from this painful subject, she asked Claudia when she had heard from her mother. Claudia winced, and almost shuddered.

'I heard from her yesterday,' she said. 'Oh, it is really too dreadful! I am ashamed of women.'

Gabrielle's surprised eyes asked for some explanation of this outburst.

'Mamma writes to me from Zanzibar,' Claudia said; 'she tells me she has got married! to an American traveller! at her time of life! And when she might have made good use of woman's independence! I feel it so deeply. She says she only knew him a fortnight. She met him somewhere in her travels through Africa; and now they are married; and they are bringing out a book of travels together. She has taken his name. She calls herself Mrs. Fullager. He is a Dr. Fullager. The book is to be by Dr. and Mrs. Fullager.'

Gabrielle was not surprised so much now at poor Claudia's invectives against matrimony.

'Well, Claudia,' she said, trying to make the best of it, 'I suppose your mother understands what she needs for her own happiness better than anyone could know for her. It is not much of a loss to you; I mean, she was not much with you.'

'No, our ways were very much apart; it isn't that I feel so much about. It is the giving up of a principle. Why must there be nothing but marrying? There was a friend of mine—a man—oh, such a valued and useful friend, so full of principle and high purpose; such a noble creature; we all so respected him. I mean, we women who think deeply on our position and our future. He went with us in everything. And now what does he do? He wants to get married! Nothing will do for him but to talk of getting married.'

Another grievance, Gabrielle thought. Perhaps in her heart poor Claudia felt too warmly towards this model man; and now he proposes to another! No wonder the poor little maid is rather sore on the subject of marriage.

'I suppose it is the common weakness of humanity, Claudia. You must forgive us all. And this misguided friend of yours—is he married?'

'Oh, no,' Claudia said indignantly, and with a slight flush on her cheek; 'he is not indeed.'

'Was he refused—or was he reasoned out of his folly?'

'He was refused; he was refused in the most decisive manner. He will not attempt such a thing again, I venture to think.'

'Poor fellow! I am quite sorry for him. Who was the girl? is it a secret?'

'I was the girl,' said Claudia. 'I told him what I thought of his offer. I was in no mood for such things just then—he came to me the very moment after I had received mamma's letter announcing her marriage.'

'That was an unlucky moment indeed,' said Gabrielle, hardly able to repress a smile. 'But if I knew him, Claudia, I think I should advise him not wholly to despair. I think I should recommend him to approach you at some other time, when the effect of your mamma's announcement is not quite so strong on your mind. You speak so highly of him, that I am sure he must be worthy of you and would make you a good husband.'

'I always thought highly of him until that moment,' Claudia admitted. 'I thought he had too earnest a soul for such weakness as that. I told him so.'

'Ah, well, I don't think, somehow, he can feel quite despondent,' Gabrielle said. 'If I should ever come to know him, I shall tell him what I think he ought to do, Claudia.'

Gabrielle felt reassured as to the future of poor Claudia. It did seem hard on the child at first that her mother should have married again at such a time of life and left her. But Claudia's subsequent revelation made things look brighter. The noble young man with the earnest soul will ask again, Gabrielle thought; and Claudia will prove an adoring wife one of these days; and her sisters in the cause will mourn over her fall.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PAULINA PUTS HER FOOT IN IT.

AN ominous calmness prevailed for some days in Gabrielle's little world. Nothing was going on, to all appearance, as regarded Paulina and her plot. It was ceasing to be talked about among the people Gabrielle knew. Some had only heard of it in a vague way, and began now to think there was no truth in the story of any such accusation having been made by the odd woman who spoke at public meetings. Clarkson Fielding was seen with Sir Wilberforce almost every day. They rode in the park together, and often paid visits to Lady Honeybell. Sir Wil-

berforce was very happy. One of the reasons, it will be remembered, why he had long hesitated about asking Gabrielle to marry him was that he feared if she should refuse him he would have to be shut out of her society for a long time, and he liked her so much that this would have been a very severe privation to him. Now, however, things had so turned out that he could see her as often as he liked. She was to be his brother's wife; his sister-in-law. They would always be the closest friends. Sir Wilberforce came gradually to the sound conclusion that this was really better for him than marrying her. He called her 'Gabrielle' already; she called him 'Wilberforce.' He knew she liked him very much; she always told him so. He had, indeed, behaved with the most simple chivalry in the whole affair. He never felt the slightest doubt as to the falsehood of Paulina's story, and he entered at once into the meaning of Gabrielle's resolve to be married before any step was taken to prove it false.

'Quite right, quite right, Gabrielle; just the proper thing to do; she always knows best, Clarkson. It would never do for you and me, Gabrielle, to have it said that we wanted Clarkson to prove anything to satisfy us. No, no; never do. We'll have the marriage first; and then we'll go to work about the proofs and all that. Gad, I only hope that beastly woman won't bolt in the meanwhile. Shouldn't wonder if she did, you know. She'll want to escape punishment; but we must have her punished.'

Gabrielle in her heart wished Paulina would escape; would take herself off somehow. She shrank from the idea of inflicting criminal punishment on any woman, however bad; and as long as Clarkson and she were happy and Sir Wilberforce was content with them, she cared nothing for what anyone might say.

Therefore a curious quiet set in. It was useless to think of taking any proceedings against Paulina without the most distinct evidence of the falsehood of her story. Until this had been got, the less said or done the better. Up to the present, Paulina had done little more than write letters to various persons declaring that she was the wife of the man who now called himself Clarkson Fielding. Some of the persons thus addressed began after a while to regard her as a mad-woman. They knew that Clarkson Fielding visited Gabrielle openly every day at Lady Honeybell's. That was enough for them.

Clarkson still paid his lonely visits to Gabrielle's house in the park. It was still unsettled as to the purpose to which

Albert Vanthorpe's money was to be devoted. Mrs. Leven, when addressed upon the subject, had resolutely declined to have anything to do with it, or even to offer any suggestion about it. She intimated through her husband that she would receive any or all the memorials of her dead son that Gabrielle might be willing to part with, and could no longer have any interest in; but she would do no more than that. She declined to see Clarkson Fielding, or to offer any opinion as to whether he was or was not her eldest son. When her husband told her that she would probably have to give evidence in a court of law on the question, she calmly answered that she would wait until she was compelled to do so. The trip to the Pyrenees had to be put off indefinitely. Major Leven was making preparations to accompany Fielding to New Orleans. He had been seeing a good deal of Fielding lately, and had come to admire him very thoroughly. He, too, had been won over to the scheme of the immediate marriage. So for a few days things went very quietly on with Gabrielle and with her lover. Miss Elvin was extremely disappointed. She had been in full expectation of a splendid scandal; and now it began almost to seem as if nothing were going to happen. She was afraid Paulina had disappeared altogether.

Paulina, however, had no notion of disappearing. She was impatient for an opportunity of asserting herself. It was time that she made some new stroke for notoriety. The public whom she had charmed for a time—the peculiar part of the public, that is to say, which is always on the look-out for anyone with a grievance—was beginning to grow tired of her. Some were not only tired but scandalised. She had been taken up in the first instance a good deal by a certain advanced and sentimental section of the advocates of woman's rights. It was the creed of most of these ladies that in every dispute which could by any possibility arise between man and woman, the man must be in the wrong. A woman in any case ought to be assumed to be in the right. With such ladies, therefore, Paulina Vanthorpe was at first a sort of heroine. But, to do them justice, they were all women of thorough integrity and purity. They were well-bred women, for the most part—ladies in the true sense of the word. They soon became a little astonished at Paulina's manners. This, however, would not have greatly affected her in their estimation; for who shall say that a woman is to be abandoned to injustice, and flung down a defenceless victim at the feet of man, merely because she breathes her aspirates occasionally in the wrong place, and uses

her handkerchief a little too noisily? But after a while some of her patronesses began to entertain grave doubts about the whiteness of Paulina's soul. Even her lies did not always seem exactly white. The sentimental advocates of women's rights began to shrink away from her. Furthermore, the wiser among them were well aware of the harm done to their cause by the exhibition of eccentric figures as its representatives. Most of them, therefore, drew away from Paulina; and she seemed likely to have to fall back on that class of admirers who can always be interested in a woman's-rights advocate if she wears trousers, or who take up the representative of a grievance only after several courts of law have declared that he or she has no grievance at all, and that the only just fault to be found with society is that it has not long before consigned him or her to prison or madhouse.

Therefore, even if she had no other motive to spur the sides of her intent, Paulina would have been moved to seek some new way of creating a sensation by the evident decay of her hold over what she grandiloquently called the public opinion of the English people. She saw that something new must be attempted, and she had cleverness enough to know that if once she made herself the heroine of some astonishing story, some people would be found to believe her statement, even though arithmetical and mathematical evidence had given it the lie. Paulina loved notoriety almost as much as she loved revenge, and 'fizz,' and fine clothes. Her energetic soul was happy only when she was doing something—'kicking up a row,' as she called it. Therefore she looked forward with genuine delight to the prospect of the great struggle in which she was about to engage, and the stupendous scandal of which she was to be the heroine.

She was not allowed, however, to remain an occupant of Fielding's rooms in Bolingbroke Place. A cool solicitor, employed at Major Leven's suggestion, came to the care-taker of the house, formally announced the expiration of Fielding's tenancy, paid duly up for the proper time of notice, and warning that Mr. Fielding had nothing whatever to do with the person who claimed to be his wife, and whom he would probably have occasion to proceed against in a court of law. Paulina, therefore, had to go, or to be expelled by the hands of the police. Her own idea at first was in favor of the dramatic effect of the injured wife dragged from the hearth that ought to be hers, by the violent hands of the minions of the law. But the few advanced ladies who still held by her

discouraged this idea altogether, and Robert Charlton, being appealed to, expressed utter disgust at the bare suggestion of it. Paulina therefore withdrew, rather reluctantly, and not without many doubts that a grand effect had been missed. She consoled herself by writing, or having written for her, a letter to the United States Minister in London, in which she represented herself as a lady from New Orleans who had been trapped into marriage with a British aristocrat, and was now made a victim by British law because of the machinations of her husband's powerful relatives. The United States Minister proved unworthy of his high place. He began by drily requesting through some underling the evidences of Paulina's nationality. These were not quite satisfactory, and when Paulina undertook to supplement them he wrote again, still through the underling, to say that it would not be necessary to trouble her, inasmuch as in any case the United States did not claim the right to compel London lodging-house keepers to let their apartments to American ladies.

Paulina's committee—she had a committee already organised all to her own grievance—comprised one brave American lady, who was a professor of spiritualism, and a contributor to one of the leading journals of the city of New Padua in the United States—a city of which some readers may possibly remember to have heard before. This lady wrote a series of letters for that journal, in which she denounced the United States Minister in London as a disgrace to his country, as a man who made himself the tool and sycophant of the British aristocracy, and who had done what was in him to further the ends of a base conspiracy of that aristocracy against a noble and much-injured New Orleans lady. Her descriptions of Paulina's personal appearance were such as only the adulation of lovers would have applied to Marie Antoinette or the beautiful Gummings. Short passages from them appeared as paragraphs in the 'personal' columns of most of the American papers, and led to the impression in many Western States that Paulina Vanthorpe was the reigning beauty of Europe.

Paulina took quiet lodgings not far from Bolingbroke Place. She was in constant consultation with Robert Charlton. He always came to see her; she did not go to see him, not caring to obtrude her presence any more on the place from which she had been harshly expelled. Robert Charlton preferred in any case that she should not come to his rooms. He did not want to be openly identified with her there. Besides, he did not wish her to know that his wife was no longer with him. He

held by Paulina still, because he blamed Fielding for every misfortune that had come on him, or that he had brought on himself, and it soothed his soul to be a sharer in any effort to interfere with Fielding's happiness. He felt sure that Gabrielle Vanthorpe must hate and despise him now; and this thought made him desperate, made him long to do harm to somebody. He had visions of his wife being sheltered and made much of by Gabrielle, and of the two women denouncing and despising him. The unfortunate Charlton's feelings towards Gabrielle were strangely mixed. She was the only woman he had ever seen before whom he could have fallen down in admiration. She was the only woman of that class who had ever treated him like a man and a brother. Therefore his head was turned by her; and at the same time he hated her, because she was of a higher class than he, and must, therefore, he felt convinced, have looked down upon him even while she was kind to him. Some of Fielding's early chaff with Charlton about Gabrielle had genuine truth in it. He was a good deal of the 'Caliban-Robespierre-Desmoulins' order, as Fielding called it. He would have found some satisfaction in adjusting to the guillotine the neck of the prettiest and sweetest woman, if he fancied she had despised him in her days of pride. The lower he sank the more he felt sure Gabrielle must despise him, and the more intense grew his anger towards her.

He was very poor. He got very little work to do now. He had been inattentive and idle of late; and an idea had gone abroad among his patrons, or those who once were his patrons, that he was given to drink—a very wrong idea, but which told heavily against him. His odd ways and strange aggressive speech gave strength to the impression. He owed for the rent of his rooms; he did not know how to get the money, and the idea of being turned out, and of this coming to the ears of Janet and her people, who he presumed would exult over it, made him ready to encounter any degradation rather than that. So he went down one step more in meanness and borrowed money from Paulina. Paulina, to be sure, offered the loan, for she saw his uneasiness, and easily guessed at its cause, and volunteered a helping hand with the free way of a regular comrade. He had done her good service, she said, and why shouldn't she lend him money while she had it? 'Poor devils ought to help each other,' was her pithy way of expressing her sentiments. Charlton took the money, and hated her.

He made no effort to recover his wife. He knew where

she had gone well enough ; at least, he had no doubt upon the subject. It is one of the curious inconsistencies of human nature that the jealous should sometimes torment themselves and others with suspicions and accusations in which they have not really the slightest belief. Charlton knew that Janet was as true and loyal a wife as ever lived ; and yet a word about anyone offering her any attention made him furious even in his best days, and in later days not alone made him furious, but made him vent his wrath in taunts and reproaches directed against the poor little woman herself. His jealous anger had lately been still more intensified by the consciousness that he was unworthy of her, and that a woman of any feeling and spirit could not help despising him. He had gone down from meanness to meanness until now he recognised himself the depth of his descent, and did not believe that it could be recovered. So he allowed Janet to pass away out of his life, as every good purpose and manly hope had passed out of it. He did not think that they could ever live together again : and now he preferred not to see her or hear from her any more. Sometimes, when he had been wandering about the streets, and came home—if that wretched place could be called a home—he was almost afraid that Janet might have been stricken with pity for him and so have come back.

Meanwhile, it puzzled and alarmed him not a little that he heard of no movement being made by Fielding. Paulina's enemies appeared to be going on just as though she were not in existence. She had now written letters to everyone who could possibly be supposed to have the remotest interest in the case ; she had formed a committee to assist her in the redress of her wrongs ; she had spread her story as widely as she could ; and 'the other side,' as she called it, had not yet taken the slightest notice of her. Mrs. Leven had not even acknowledged the receipt of her letters. To Charlton this appeared gravely ominous. He began to feel more and more convinced that 'the other side' saw its way only too clearly, and was simply biding its time to come down on Paulina, and perhaps on him too, with the heavy hand of the criminal law. Paulina, on the other hand, was what she would herself have called 'chippy.'

'They daren't meet me,' she declared. 'That marriage is off, you'll find.'

Charlton made up his mind that he would, once for all, get to the truth or untruth of Paulina's story. She had him in her power now ; and he determined that he would either have

her in his power or he would at least satisfy himself that he was right in taking up her cause. He thought long over a conclusive test by which to try her story. He paid her a hasty visit one day and found her alone.

'I say, we must be doing something,' he said. 'I hear the other side's preparing a move. We ought to strike the first blow, don't you think?'

'Soon as you like, old man; only tell us the blow to strike. We've been letting them have it a good deal already, haven't we?'

'Yes; but I hear many things, you know,' he said coolly; 'my wife is staying with her aunt, Mrs. Bramble, in Mrs. Vanthorpe's house; and she gets to know things.' This story lent him an opportunity of giving a plausible explanation of Janot's absence, in case Paulina should hear of it.

'Oh, and tells you all she hears? I say, ain't she a trump of a little woman! I never thought she had the cleverness—and I didn't think she'd have done it, anyhow; she seemed so infatuated about one who shall be nameless. Eh, Charlton? Don't be angry, my dear boy; it's as bad for me as it is for you, if there's anything to be said about it at all. Well, get on. So we have a spy in the enemy's camp? Lord, how nice!'

'Suppose they were going to get married, what would you do?' Charlton asked.

'Present myself at the church, and stop the business,' Paulina answered promptly.

'Well, but you know that your mere word would not exactly do. It may carry conviction to my mind,' he said, with a sneer which he did not try to hide; 'but it might not to those who did not know you quite so well. You have some proofs at hand?'

'Of course I have,' the undaunted Paulina answered without a moment's hesitation.

'I hear,' he went on in a low tone, 'that they are very anxious about some letter that Clarkson Fielding once wrote to you and your husband. I fancy it was a farewell letter written to you when he was on the point of death, saying something about his brother and England, and all that sort of thing. I hear about it in this way. Our gentleman, your husband up yonder, I am told volunteers an explanation of this; he fancies, I believe, that you have it in your possession ready to produce.'

Paulina tossed her head knowingly as if she meant to say, 'Just wait and you'll see.' She did not quite understand the drift of the matter yet, and therefore would not commit herself.

'He tries to explain it now,' Charlton said.

'Oh, does he? I should just like to see him.'

'Yes, he says he only wrote it as a practical joke, and that he never had the faintest notion of dying. You see, he still insists that he is Clarkson Fielding, and not your husband. He says you are going to bring out this letter which he wrote as a mere joke, and offer it as a regular death-bed farewell and a proof that the writer is really dead. He wants to be beforehand with his explanation.'

'Oh! does he, though? He won't succeed, though. I see his dodge well enough.'

'Then it was really a death-bed farewell?'

'Why, of course it was. Poor Clarkson was dying, and he knew it, dear boy; and he wrote to me.'

'To both of you, was it not? you and your husband together.'

'Yes, yes; didn't I say so?'

'You did, certainly. I suppose, when your husband gave it to you to keep, he had not much idea that he would ever have any occasion to pass himself off as Clarkson Fielding?'

'Not a bit of it. He only thought of that after, and when we were still in partnership.'

'If you had that letter,' Charlton said meditatively, 'I fancy it would be a great blow for them.'

'Of course I have it,' Paulina answered unhesitatingly. 'You don't suppose I was going to allow a thing like that to go losing?'

'Why, no,' Charlton said, 'it is rather too important for that. I saw its importance first from the efforts he was making to explain it away in advance and make it out a practical joke. But I wonder you never told me before.'

'Man! do you think I can keep everything in my head? I have lots of proofs as good as that; and I have that too.'

'That's a capital thing for us. And it was just such a letter as I say—taking a farewell of you both as his closest friends, and telling you he was on the point of death?'

'Just that,' Paulina-coolly replied. 'Every word of it is engraven on my memory. Poor Clarkson!'

'Have you it with you here?'

'Well, no; not exactly here. But I have it all the same. I was reading it over the other day. Poor Clarkson! He was a good chap.'

'How lucky that you kept it!' Charlton said.

'Ain't it, just?' she answered.

'If it were lost,' Charlton went on slowly, 'I suppose you could dictate it all over again to me?'

'Every word,' the guileless Paulina proudly declared.

'I don't see what harm there would be in restoring it—writing it out again, from your dictation, with the proper dates and all that—always supposing that it should have been mislaid somewhere, and of course always supposing that you are perfectly certain there was such a letter and certain of all its contents. Are you perfectly certain about all that?'

'Why, of course I am. Didn't I tell you again and again that I was? I know where to put my hand upon it in a moment; at least, I'm sure I do. But of course if I can't just find it, why then, it would be quite proper to supply its place as you say.'

'All I want to be certain of,' Charlton said emphatically, 'is that there is such a letter; and of course I am certain of that now. I suppose you have read it over often?'

'Hundreds of times—shed many a tear over it too.'

'I dare say; very natural. Well, it is a great score in your favour to have that letter. We might never have known how valuable it was only for his fears about it.'

'His conscience betrayed him,' Paulina said grandly.

Charlton knew it all now. He knew that he had to deal with an impostor of the coarsest kind. There was no such letter as that he talked of; he had invented the whole story of it to try Paulina; and he saw how she jumped at it with an eagerness which only the most audacious impostor would have shown. It was almost childish, the unthinking manner in which she allowed herself to be drawn into such an exposure of her falsehood. Charlton had had doubts before, amounting at moments to something like conviction; but he had not had actual conviction until now. He now saw himself entered as the confederate of a brazen-faced and vulgar impostor; destined perhaps to share the punishment that would most certainly await her. To this he had sunk step by step. From the first mean action, even from the first indulgence of a mean motive or suspicion, the descent had been by a logical process of successive steps. As he went to his lonely lodging that night, he was thinking whether he could do anything better than commit suicide. To denounce Paulina and expose her would hardly now restore him to the good opinion of any decent creature. He regarded himself as lost beyond all depth. The very trick by which he had detected Paulina was in itself hardly worthy of a man. The truth, too, must be spoken: he feared Paulina and

her possible revenge. He had a nervous dread of her much greater than he would have had of a man. His was a nervous and a feeble nature altogether; most or many of his offences came in the first instance from want of animal spirits and animal courage. He had more than once thought that it is easy for those to be virtuous who are brave. Many men and women might have acknowledged to themselves the melancholy truth of the reflection. It is easy to speak the truth when one has the nerves that do not shrink from any little explosion that may follow. The moral descent often begins in the first shrinking from a slight trouble of this kind. Becky Sharp saw no difficulty in being virtuous on ten thousand a year. Many a broken-down and degraded creature would once have found it easy enough to be truthful and honest if he could only have commanded his nerves and ordered his heart to be calm. Robert Charlton was afraid of the stalwart fury whom he had allowed to gain an ascendancy over him. He thought of exposing her and then committing suicide. He thought of throwing himself on the generosity of Gabrielle. He thought of this again and again. But he feared that in Fielding he would find no mercy, and that Gabrielle would spurn him.

He entered his miserable room. It looked wretchedly lonely. It was late and dark. A drizzling rain had been falling, and he was wet; and there was no fire. He struck a match and lit his lamp. The place seemed even more cheerless now. There was the seat where poor Janet used to sit; poor Janet! she was very fond of him once; and now she despised him. There, near to her, he used to sit and do his work in those early days—not, truly, so far away—when he yet had ambition, and hoped to rise to be something of an artist, a real artist, not a mere handicraftsman, and when he believed he could make Janet happy and give her a home worthy of her, and when he used to love to see her let down her golden hair. He had treated her badly, he began now to feel. He had made her miserable with mean jealousies; and then he had taken to despising her and snubbing her because she was not clever, and educated, and a lady. She would have stood by him in any poverty or trial, he was sure: and she would always have admired him and thought him a great man. Well, well, no use thinking about all that now.

His eyes wandering about the room turned to the door with its little letter-box; and he saw that there was a letter in the box. He got up listlessly and took out the letter. He knew the handwriting well. It was that of Gabrielle Vanthorpe.

He found a few kindly lines from Gabrielle saying that he must excuse her if she intruded, but that she had been deeply pained to hear that Janet and he were not happy now, that she had set her heart on bringing them together, and begging that he would come and see her next day, not at Lady Honeybell's, but at her own house. It was plain that she at least had no suspicion of the part he was playing as Paulina's accomplice. She at least believed him worthy of something yet. The thought was too much for the unhappy creature; he sat down and burst into tears.

At that same moment Janet was gliding mournfully through the empty rooms of Gabrielle's deserted house. The rooms looked ghostly in the misty atmosphere of the damp evening. Poor Janet came into the room where she had been with her husband on that memorable night when she thought things were to go so happily for him and for her, and when Gabrielle seemed like some heaven-commissioned angel sent to make their lives bright. She was thinking sadly of the change that had come over her husband of late, and of the hard bitter life she had lately had with him. How it all began she could not understand; but she knew that she could bear it no longer. It was strange, she thought, that he had never tried to find her out. He might have guessed, he must have known, where she was; she had for days been in great personal fear that he would come to drag her back. Now that there seemed no ground for such a fear, she tormented herself with wondering why he had allowed her to pass thus quietly out of his life. Suddenly she heard a step on the stairs outside, and she shrank into a corner in a kind of terror. A man came in. She was on the point of giving a little scream, why she could not have told, perhaps with some wild nervous idea that it might be Robert come in search of her. It was Mr. Fielding. He started at seeing her.

'Janet!' he said with surprise—'Mrs. Charlton!'

'You didn't expect to see me here, Mr. Fielding,' she said in trembling tone.

'Well, I didn't expect to see you, perhaps, in this room just now, but I think I had a sort of belief that you were somewhere sheltered in the house. I have heard something of what has happened. I am very, very sorry for it.'

He spoke so gravely and so kindly that the tears came rushing into Janet's eyes. All his old easy familiarity of manner was changed into a quiet respectful way that her instincts enabled her to understand. Her sorrow, her loneliness, her unprotected condition gave her in his eyes a new title to respect.

'Can nothing be done?' he began; 'but no, I shan't ask you anything about it, Mrs. Charlton; I know that Gabrielle hopes and believes she can do something, and she is better qualified than I or any man could be. Do you know that I come here every evening only for the purpose of sitting a little in this room because she used to sit there; your aunt lets me in; she humours me, and is so kind.'

'Oh, Mr. Fielding,' Janet exclaimed, 'how I wish you joy, and her! You were always so good to me. You ought to be happy; she and you!'

Then she broke down and hurried out of the room, and was scolded by her aunt for having gone into it at such a time.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

'AT ONE O'CLOCK TO-MORROW.'

GABRIELLE returned for once to her old home. She had thought it best for many reasons to see Robert Charlton there. One reason was because she hoped to accomplish her end so completely that she could bring Janet and her husband together in a moment. She hoped to see them go out of the house reconciled, arm-in-arm; 'and then,' she thought, 'it will be time to have done with the place; it will have served a last good purpose for me, and may well pass into other hands.'

There was something oppressive to her good spirits in the atmosphere of the lonely house. As she passed from this room into that, she felt as if she should not be surprised to see a ghost cowering on each hearth. She went into the memorial room, and was ready to sigh over the vanity which would perpetuate a sentiment by means of a few symbols. She was glad that all the things there were to be sent to Mrs. Leven, to whom alone they would now rightly belong. Then the house would be disposed of after a while, and Gabrielle would feel herself free thenceforward of all its unwelcome obligations and its mournful memories. She would be free to think of it ever after only as the happy place where she first learned that Clarkson Fielding loved her, and where she acknowledged her love for him and to him.

But she still thought it possible that she might persuade the Charltons to occupy the place for some time, until the scheme for Charlton's becoming a West-end success should be in a fair way towards accomplishment. She had been greatly impressed

by some words of Fielding's about Charlton, and men of his morbid nature. 'Such men would be very good fellows in prosperity; it was the wind of adversity that drew out all the sour bad qualities in them. The snow resting on them brings out the flavour of some fruits, but it destroys that of others; and Charlton's is a nature that can't stand the frost. Warm him up in the sunshine of a little prosperity, and he would be sure to come all right. What we call cynicism and ill-nature in some fellows, Gabrielle, is often only the physical effect of want of success; just as we sometimes fancy a friend is out of humour with us, when he is only suffering from the tooth-ache.'

Gabrielle felt convinced that if she could put a little prosperity in Charlton's way he would become a good husband and a happy man. She did not think there was anything bad in him. Of any treachery towards herself and Fielding she had not the slightest idea. She never thought of anyone being treacherous. She felt that she should have earned a title to be happy herself, and should have propitiated the powers above, if she could succeed before she left England in reconciling Janet and her husband, and at least opening for them the door to prosperity.

She did not ask to see Janet. She did not even ask Mrs. Bramble if Janet was then in the house. This rather surprised Mrs. Bramble, who, however, only assumed that Gabrielle had too much to think of concerning herself to have any time left for thinking about Janet. Gabrielle did not say why she thus suddenly presented herself in her old home; she only told Mrs. Bramble that if anyone came to see her he was to be shown in to her at once. Knowing the jealous temperament of the unhappy Charlton, she felt that her enterprise would have much better chance of success if she could tell him at once that Janet had nothing to do with it; that she had not spoken with the little woman, or even seen her. 'He will come, surely?' she said to herself from time to time. She was as anxious about his coming, and about the success of her attempt, as another woman might have been about a presentation at Court, or her first experiment in private theatricals. She wandered about the rooms restlessly, waiting for him to come. She had herself come to the trysting-place long before the hour appointed. She might have been a girl waiting for her lover, instead of a kindly impulsive woman trying to do some good for a poor broken-down and feather-headed worker in one of the lowest of the artistic grades. She positively trembled with emotion when at

last she was told that Mr. Charlton begged to be allowed to speak a few words with her, and would not detain her long. 'No; but I will detain him longer than he thinks, perhaps,' she said to herself in great good-humour at the promising omen given by his ready obedience to her summons.

His appearance somewhat shocked her. He was looking haggard and broken-down. There was a furtive, cowering way about him, half-defiant, half-fearful, which she could not understand. He was slovenly and careless in his dress—a thing unusual in him—and his small, thin, girlish hands had a sickly look. He stood a moment at the threshold of the room and looked nervously in, as if he expected or feared to see someone else there. So manifest was the meaning of his look, that Gabrielle replied to it as though it had been something spoken.

'Come in, Mr. Charlton; there is no one here but myself. I was anxious to say a few words to you alone.'

He came in slowly, still glancing round him as a man might do who fancied that he was being drawn into an ambush. This made Gabrielle a little impatient.

'May I ask you to take a seat, Mr. Charlton? I dare say you can guess why I sent for you?'

'About Janet?' he said, with a weak attempt at a smile.

'About Janet, yes.'

'She has spoken to you, perhaps?'

'No; I have not seen her since I saw her last in your room; and I have not heard from her.'

He bent his head, but said nothing.

'I do so want to bring you and Janet together again. I do so wish to be the means of doing that much good. I can't believe there is any reason why you should not be brought together. I know there is nothing in her that is not good, and sweet, and true; and indeed I can't believe anything bad of you. Let me send for Janet.'

'It is too late,' he said.

'Too late, Mr. Charlton? Why, what folly! You talk as if you and she were separated by some gulf——'

'So we are,' he said gloomily.

'Oh, no, there is no gulf separating man and wife but death, or some evil of which you are no more capable than she. I don't believe anything bad of you.'

'If you did but know——'

'Well, I don't know. Tell me, trust to me. I have taken an interest in you for a long time. I always associate you with Bolingbroke Place, and days that if I lived a thousand years

would always be dear to me. I was very anxious to do something to make you two happy, Janet and you, and I am afraid somehow that I did more harm than good; I don't know why, but I am afraid it is so.'

'Yes, it is so,' Charlton said without raising his eyes.

'But why—tell me why? Why was it harm more than good? I meant nothing but kindness.'

'There are people,' Charlton said desperately, 'on whom some kindness is thrown away—and I'm one of them. You meant it well, Mrs. Vanthorpe; but the more kind and friendly you were to me, the more miserable was the contrast of my own beggarly and pitiful sort of life. Why shouldn't I have been a gentleman? Why shouldn't I have a woman of education for my wife? Why should I live in a garret, and have paupers for my companions, and a woman without half an idea for my wife? I used to think once I was meant for better things—I was a fool, of course; but every time you came near the place, I only thought of it more and more. Why couldn't I have been a man like *him*—and why couldn't I have had a wife like you? Look at it yourself—I don't care now what I say—do you think it likely a man like me could help seeing the contrast between Janet and you?'

He talked on in such a quick, excited way, that Gabrielle did not at first get time to follow his meaning. When she began to understand it, there was something sickening in this pitiful display of vanity and egotism.

'If I were a man,' she said, 'I should be ashamed of such feelings. I don't care what my class might be, or my way of life, I would not have allowed that any other human creature was better than I for that reason, and that I ought to grovel before him——'

'I didn't grovel——'

'What is that but grovelling? You envy some one because he has a house and you have only a couple of rooms—what is that but grovelling? For shame, Mr. Charlton! Go and pluck up some spirit, and don't be ashamed of your wife because she doesn't dress in silk and drive in a carriage——'

'No, it wasn't that; a man wants education; a man wants companionship of mind.'

'Stuff!' the impetuous Gabrielle exclaimed; 'I lose patience with such folly and vanity. It is miserable vanity, Mr. Charlton. Why didn't you, with all your ideas, and your genius, and the rest of it, teach your wife to be a companion? She would only have been too glad to learn. You might have

moulded her like wax ; and if you want adoration, she would have given it to you as—as—as nobody else would. You would have been Shakespeare, and Newton, and anything else you like for her. Well, we have said enough about this. I don't want to speak angrily to you, Mr. Charlton ; but I am not surprised at Janet any more.'

'You look down on me with contempt now,' he said, 'and I deserve it all. I despise myself ; but if you only knew how much worse I deserve of you than you think——'

'I don't think I want to hear any more, Mr. Charlton. I am not a confessor.' She had really lost patience with him.

'But it greatly concerns you and Mr. Fielding.'

Gabrielle was about to decline any further revelations, but when he spoke of Fielding she thought herself bound to listen. She sat down patiently and allowed him to go on, affecting a composure she did not feel. He told her in words now disjointed and stammering, now inflated into a kind of egotistical rhetoric, the whole story of his acquaintance with Paulina, of his share in Paulina's plot, and of the manner in which he had at length convinced himself that it was all a fabrication. His was not a nature that could be candid even in a moment of remorse and self-abasement. In the confessional itself he would have kept something back. He did not allow Gabrielle to suppose that he had never really believed in Paulina's story. He exhibited himself as one who feels ashamed of having been deceived by an unworthy fabrication, but who, the moment he finds out its falsehood, is resolute to expose it.

'This is extraordinary,' Gabrielle said when he had come to an end. 'I can't understand it ; I can't understand the motive or meaning of anyone concerned in it.' This wretched woman must be mad—why should she have such a hatred of Mr. Fielding ?

'She made love to him and he wouldn't have her,' Charlton said bluntly.

'And you, Mr. Charlton, why did you take any part in this wretched affair ? What wrong had he done to you ? What wrong had I done to you ?'

'He had done me the wrong of being happy, and free, and well-off, and a gentleman with friends and loved by—loved by people ; and with a man of my stamp that was wrong enough.'

'Yes,' said Gabrielle ; 'and I ? what wrong had I done ? I always tried to do you good.'

'I told you before ; you made my wretched miserable life more miserable because you showed me what sort of life other

people have. You were beautiful, and a lady, and clever, and charming, and if I could have had an ideal woman she would have been—like you. I could not stand Janet after I had seen you. There, I have said it all now. Think anything you like of me ; I don't care what anyone thinks of me now.'

Gabrielle rose very quietly.

'Mr. Charlton,' she said, 'I had some thought up to this moment of trying to bring Janet and you together again. I have no such thought now. As her sincere friend, I should never advise her to return to your home any more. Anything would be better than that. You are not worthy of the love of any good and faithful woman. You could not be a fit husband for a wife like Janet. The first woman who came in your way with finer clothes or a little more book-reading than your wife would carry your thoughts away from Janet. No ; if Janet asks for my advice, I will give it to her—live alone for ever rather than submit to a companionship like that. Neither God nor man dooms a woman to that.'

'Still, she is my wife by law,' he said, making feeble protest. 'I could compel her to come back to my home.'

'I don't know much about law,' Gabrielle said ; 'I dare say you could. You couldn't compel her to respect you and to love you, as she always did before.'

'You said yourself that nothing but death ought to part man and wife.'

'I had not then heard what you told me of yourself,' Gabrielle answered. 'I was thinking of some common quarrel or anger ; I was not thinking of such utter unworthiness.'

'You are very hard upon me. You have no pity.'

'No,' Gabrielle declared emphatically ; 'I have no pity for such things as that.'

He was inclined to make some abject appeal to her on the ground that she of all women ought to have some pity for his weakness, but her expression of face cowed him. He did not venture to make the attempt.

'I might perhaps,' he pleaded, 'be able to do you some service, you and Mr. Fielding ; I could help you to show up that woman's plot.'

'Mr. Fielding and I are utterly indifferent to that woman's plot, or any other plot,' Gabrielle said. 'We are going to be married at once, to show our contempt for it. She will bring harm on herself ; she can't injure us.'

'She is a dangerous woman——'

'Dangerous for those who consort with her,' Gabrielle said

with emphasis. 'Not for those who defy her. You can tell her so, Mr. Charlton, if you will.'

Perhaps there was some barb of feminine malice in these words. Gabrielle could not keep them back, so much did she now despise him; so indifferent had she grown to his feelings. He was keenly pierced by the words; they showed him how he had fallen.

'Oh, you have no mercy,' he said, with a despairing gesture; 'you are like all the rest. You have no pity, and yet you were the cause of all this to me. You didn't mean it, I know; you meant it well; but you were the cause of it all, Mrs. Vanthorpe; you were the cause of it all. I might have been happy if you hadn't tried to be kind to Janet and me.'

He was turning to leave the room. There was something of desperation in his looks which made Gabrielle for the first time afraid. A rush of pity came on her, too, with the fear. She had never seen any human creature so abject before. It seemed to be brought home to her conscience that she had no right to be so hard on his weakness and wrong-doing. What if her mistaken efforts to be kind had really done this wretched creature harm? What if his lost life and ruined nature were to be laid to her account in a higher world?

The thought made her feel humbled and almost penitent. There is a kindness which kills the character of its recipient, provided the recipient has any character left to be killed; the kindness of indiscriminate almsgiving which curses him who gives and him who takes. Perhaps there is a kindness of another sort as baneful when it too is indiscriminate; especially when it is offered to man by woman. It began to dawn upon Gabrielle that perhaps she would have done much better if she had not arrogated to herself the part of a little providence to Charlton and his wife. Perhaps it would have been better if her kindness had been a little more modestly distrustful of its own right to intervene. She began to feel this painfully. No thought for a moment entered her mind that the very despair of Charlton was what some women in her place would have considered a tribute to their own attractiveness. What she most despised Charlton for was the appeal that would have suggested such an idea. But it began to be clear to her that there may be a dangerous levity of kindness as well as of coquetry. She was softened in a moment by the thought. She stopped Charlton as he was going.

'One moment,' she said; 'pray stay. Have I really done you this wrong—this harm, at least, for I meant no wrong? I

should be so sorry for that. I only meant to do you some little good if I could. I liked your wife so much—and you for her sake.'

'It does not matter now,' he said grimly; and he was going.

'Oh yes, it does matter,' Gabrielle pleaded earnestly—she was now the one to plead—'If I have been the cause of any harm to you, it is only right that I should be made to know of it.'

'You did the harm,' he said; 'that is certain. You didn't think of it—and I'll tell you why you didn't: because you thought an unfortunate devil like me could have no feeling towards a woman like you, and wouldn't presume to contrast you with any poor ignorant creature of his own class who might be tied to him. I wish I had never seen you—although I know that you haven't a thought to me or to anyone that isn't good and kind—yes, I wish I had never seen you! I might have been content for ever with my poor little Janet, and never fancied that I should have been happier with a woman of education who could talk to me. I wonder who will talk to me now?'

'Mr. Charlton,' Gabrielle said with quiet earnestness, 'I am more deeply grieved than I could say to hear that my unfortunate interference has been the cause of any pain; but I will try to make amends. It is not too late. You spoke of Janet just now in a manner that makes me hope you are sensible of the cruel injustice you have done to her. I welcome your words. I take back all that I said before; I think Janet and you ought to be brought together once again. Let me be the peacemaker and atone in that way for any harm I may have done.'

He shook his head. 'Too late,' he said again.

'No; not too late. Nothing is too late while we live. Perhaps Janet is now in this very house. Stay here for a moment—I will go and look for her; and you shall meet face to face, and speak to each other.'

She was leaving the room in haste. Charlton interposed.

'To-morrow,' he stammered; 'let it be to-morrow; not to-day, please. I would rather not to-day.'

'To-morrow,' Gabrielle said with a faint blush, 'I am to be married; and I am then leaving England.'

'So soon?' Charlton said. Then he asked abruptly: 'Where are you going to be married, and when?'

A moment's doubt crossed Gabrielle's mind. Could he

possibly be asking such a question in the interest of the irrepressible Paulina, and with some purpose of enabling her to make some disturbance? But she dismissed the thought at once, and quietly told Charlton the place and the hour.

'Why should not you and Janet be present?' she said, a sudden hope coming up in her mind. 'It would seem like a blessing on my marriage, Mr. Charlton, if I could see Janet and you there together and reconciled. Do let me have this happiness. If I have done you any harm, be generous and do this much good for me in return. Stay here; I will look for Janet.'

She made a half-imperious gesture to him, to tell him that he was to wait, and she ran out of the room. She did not find Janet: Mrs. Bramble had sent the poor little woman out for a walk with one of the maids. Mrs. Bramble had now got to expect a regular visitation from Fielding every evening, and with a superfluous prudence, having known of Robert's absurd jealousy, she resolved for the future to have Janet out of the house when Miss Gabrielle's lover was likely to present himself. 'One can't be too careful about these things,' the good woman thought. 'We must not leave anything in the power of that bad man to say.' The bad man, it is perhaps well to observe, was not Clarkson Fielding but Robert Charlton. Gabrielle's return to Charlton was a little delayed, for in her way she came upon Fielding himself, and was caught unceremoniously in his arms. Not having had the faintest thought of meeting her there, he felt the wilder delight. She explained to him in the hastiest manner what she was trying to do; and then broke away, released on parole with a positive promise to return.

She felt disappointed as she made her way back to the room where she had left Charlton. It was unfortunate that she should have failed to find Janet at once. 'It was a great chance lost. If she could have brought the husband and wife together at that moment, she might have joined their hearts before the sun had wholly gone down. So she was thinking as she entered the room. But then she sadly changed her mind. Charlton had gone. He had managed to get out of the house unseen by anyone. It was plain that he had escaped in order that he might not meet Janet. Gabrielle was disheartened and almost dismayed. It seemed to her that the misunderstanding between Janet and her husband must have deeper roots than she had supposed. Like a woman, she was more concerned about the estrangement between the husband and the wife than about the treacherous part which Charlton acknowledged that he had

played in regard to Paulina's story. She thought that a very bad thing for him to have done; but she was not impressed by it as a man would have been. Most men would have regarded the breach of manly honour and truth as a graver offence than any quarrel with one's wife. Gabrielle went back to her lover and told him of her trouble. But it must be owned that they soon ceased to talk of Charlton, and began to talk only of themselves. To-morrow they hoped to be free to meet when and where they pleased; to-morrow they hoped to leave England together.

While they sat in the gloaming, Robert Charlton sought out Paulina. He found her in her lodgings alone and a good deal dispirited. She yawned and was melancholy; 'in the blues,' she put it.

'Oh, dear me, Charlton, I'm glad you have come in,' she said, 'although you know very well you ain't a lively companion. But you're better than nothing. Ain't it a dull evening? I don't know what to do with myself—really, I don't.'

'Why do you sit at home in this dull way?' he asked. 'Why don't you go out somewhere? Why don't you amuse yourself?' There was an unusual animation about his manner.

'Well, I don't know where to go exactly. I should like to go to some rattling good music-hall, or to some place where one could see dancing. I should like, to go to Cremorne. Is Cremorne running yet? We say "running" in America, Charlton, for going on, you know.'

'Why don't you go to Cremorne?'

'Because, you see, while all this business is going on, I am forced to be very prudent and proper and all that sort of thing. It would never do if I were to be seen showing myself off at some dancing-place. One can't be too careful, Charlton; a woman can't, I mean.'

'You are tired of playing at respectability,' Charlton said.

'That's about it, Charlton; I'm very tired of it. That sort of thing was never made for Paulina Vanthorpe. I say, wouldn't it be a lark if you and I were to go off to Cremorne together? How would the little wife like it, I wonder?'

'If you are tired of being respectable,' Charlton asked, not replying to her question about the little wife, 'why don't you give it up and amuse yourself?'

'Lord, man, I can't until I have put this business through one way or the other. It would be no end of a score for the other side if I were to be making a frisky matron of myself. I wish the whole thing was over; I'm sick and tired of it.'

‘Why don’t you drop it altogether?’

‘Well, you see, I have gone too far for that. Besides, I am determined to have my revenge on him. I have old scores to pay off on Master Fielding, I can tell you—things a woman never forgives. I’ll make trouble for him out of this; I’ll stop his marrying for him; there will be scandal, and there will have to be investigations and witnesses, and goings and comings; and before it’s half over, no one can tell what mayn’t happen. I’m sorry for her; I am indeed. But I must have my revenge on him.’

‘Besides, you know,’ Charlton said slowly, ‘he is your husband, Philip Vanthorpe. You could not let him marry another woman while you were living.’

He spoke in so peculiar a tone that Paulina looked suddenly at him with a suspicious gleam in her eyes.

‘Of course I can’t let him marry another woman; and I don’t mean to. I dare say they would pay me to drop the whole thing, but I’m not going to do anything of the kind; I want revenge.’

‘Suppose they were to steal a march on you and get married?’

Paulina jumped up from her chair with passion flaming in her looks. ‘I wish you wouldn’t say such things!’ she said. ‘They can’t do it, and they shan’t! Didn’t I tell you I would go to the church and denounce them and stop it up? I should like that of all things.’

‘After all,’ Charlton said meditatively, ‘I don’t know that it wouldn’t be better for you to let them get married. You could prosecute him then for bigamy.’

‘Don’t bother me about your bigamies. That ain’t my game. I want to keep them unmarried. I don’t care about your prosecutions. I tell you they shan’t marry. And now don’t annoy me any more with your talk of that kind, there’s a good fellow, or I may lose my temper.’

She sat down again.

‘Well,’ Charlton said, ‘I only called in to-night to say that I am promised some news to-morrow. Something is going to be resolved on, I am told. I believe it is pretty certain that he and Major Leven are going out to New Orleans together.’

‘Oh, capital!’ Paulina exclaimed, clapping her hands; ‘just the thing I am glad to hear. There’s the marriage broke off for goodness knows how long. The voyage out and the hunting up of proofs and evidences and things, and all the delays, and then the coming back—Lord! it will take six months at the very

least; and who can tell what may happen between this and then?’

‘Just so,’ Charlton assented; ‘who can say what may happen between this and then? Between this and then? Who can say what may happen to-morrow?’

‘This is good news you bring me, Charlton, if it only turns out to be true.’

‘I believe it is true; I am told positively that they are going out together to New Orleans. Anyhow, I shall know for certain to-morrow. I shall come and let you know at once.’

‘That’s a dear good fellow; I shall be wild with anxiety. When shall I expect you?’

‘Let me see.’ He stopped and considered. ‘Twelve o’clock I shall probably be able to leave that place’—he did not say what place—‘and I shall come straight to you. Oh, well, let us say one o’clock. I shall have the news for you at one o’clock to-morrow.’

‘All right. I’ll stay in bed until late. I shall only get up in time to see you at one o’clock. I think when one is expecting anything, one doesn’t mind the anxiety of waiting so much when one is in bed.’

‘At one o’clock, then,’ he said, ‘I’ll bring you the news. At one o’clock, mind. We shall know for certain then.’

There was something odd about his manner. ‘I can’t quite make out that chap,’ Paulina said, when he had gone. ‘Anyhow, I shall be glad to see him at one o’clock to-morrow.’

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FAIR PENITENT.

THE day for which Paulina was looking out, the ‘to-morrow’ of her last evening’s conversation, came with wonderful softness and brightness. So clear was the sky, that one might see at the far end of long London thoroughfares the faint outlines of gentle hills and uplands of which he had not before suspected the existence. If he happened to be looking south from any point of tolerable elevation, he was sometimes amazed to see the Crystal Palace standing out on the shoulder of its hill as clearly as if it were just under his eyes. The sunlight had something magical in its soft intensity. It was so gentle one might look it straight in the face, and so bright that it lit up

lunes and crannies that always before seemed too darksome to admit any genial influence. Just the very morning, one might have said, for a young bride. No auspices could be more gracious for a wedding. No doubt the experienced would see something ominous of sudden change in the almost unearthly brightness and the strange stillness. Once there came in Weimar an hour of indescribable quiet; the very clouds stood still; the air was breathless in its soft delight: and Goethe knew that an earthquake was impending over some part of the world. Experienced persons who looked up at the skies this day said that a sudden change was coming. But it will not matter to the young bride if only the change keeps off until the sun goes down. The happy omen is complete then. The future of the young wife is supposed to be assured if only the day be genial up to the time of the sun's sinking. Then, come foul weather or fair, it is all the same so far as augury for her is concerned.

Some such thought may have been passing through the mind of Clarkson Fielding on this particular morning as he looked up at the sky. He understood enough of the evidences of the atmosphere and the season to know that a change was coming; but he was glad to think that it was some hours off; and he wished the sun to shine and give good omen for yet a while. As for Gabrielle, she knew nothing and thought nothing of weather symptoms: she only knew that she was full of happiness, although nervous and tremulous enough withal; and the sun would have shone for her if it were the midst of an arctic winter. It must be owned that Clarkson Fielding was nervous and restless, too, that morning. When Wilberforce called for him, Clarkson was glad to be compelled to talk. It took him out of himself and his own emotions for the moment. There are occasions when even a Briton must be nervous. Wilberforce ventured on some mild pleasantry concerning his brother's evident condition. 'I didn't think you knew there were such things as nerves,' he said. Clarkson answered good-humouredly and very truly that he had found out in himself a good many emotions lately of which he had not known anything before. Then they went out together.

Paulina was waiting in much anxiety and impatience the coming of her confederate. She had adopted the plan which she told him of in order to render her anxiety bearable, and remained in bed until a very advanced hour of the morning. Paulina was a person of that not uncommon class to whom the most delightful thing after great exertion is the full indulgence of laziness. She was as indolent as she was energetic. When

she had nothing better to do she could lie in bed with all the satisfaction that Vendôme himself might have felt. That great soldier, as we are told, never got out of bed except when he could not help it; as, for example, when he had to put in an appearance at court, or to fight the English in the field. Even in his campaigns he lay in bed until it was absolutely necessary that he should get up and take command. Then he jumped up, put on a tremendous spurt of energy, showed that he had all the genius of a true commander; sometimes, let us acknowledge, giving the English general a good deal more than that officer liked; and then Vendôme went to bed again. Paulina was a sort of feminine Vendôme in alternation of action and repose, and equal relish of each in its turn. She was, as a rule, very fond of having her breakfast in bed, and indeed seldom consumed that meal except while lolling there. This one particular morning, however, she was lazy on principle. Mr. Shandy finds that all mental trouble is best endured by mortals in a recumbent posture; Paulina's philosophy had taught her that this is especially true of anxiety. So she lay in bed until it approached the hour at which Charlton might be expected; and then she got up and dressed.

Her anxiety had more than one cause. She had been a good deal impressed by Charlton's peculiar manner the evening before; and the longer she thought over it the more she became convinced that it was in some way ominous. While he was with her she was too eager about the news he brought to pay much attention to his odd manner or to her own suspicions; but after he had gone the impression deepened and deepened. 'Something is up with that chap,' she kept repeating to herself; and she at once thought of treachery. Had he gone over to the other side? Was he up to any dodge of that sort? Was he playing into Fielding's hands, and letting the other side see every card that she and he were preparing to use? When he came at one o'clock, might it perhaps be in the company of the minions of the law about to escort her to prison? Paulina had said very truly to Charlton that she would not care much about punishment if only she got her revenge. But suppose she only got the punishment, and her enemies had the revenge? Suppose she were dragged off to prison, and while she was there Fielding and Gabrielle got married?

The idea was insufferable. Paulina walked up and down the room restless as a hyæna in a cage. She had at one moment a thought of going out to find Charlton, so dreadful

did the delay and the suspense begin to seem. But the time was nearly up, and it would be merely absurd to run the risk of losing him altogether by vaguely hunting for him she knew not where. So she kept indoors and waited; if that can be called waiting—that sort of performance which the hyena keeps up in her cage. The last five minutes seemed of never-ending length. Paulina hardly took her eyes from the little clock on the chimney-piece; until at last she put her hand over her eyes and said she would not look up again until she heard it strike one. So she walked up and down, seeing nothing but the strip of floor just beneath her feet. At last the little clock piped out the one stroke. ‘He isn’t coming at all!’ Paulina said to herself at once, almost before the stroke had ceased to echo. In another moment, however, she heard his foot upon the stairs. He seemed to come with deliberate and torturing slowness.

The door opened. Charlton came in. He had a strange expression on his face, partly as of triumph, partly as of amusement. The moment Paulina saw him she felt sure he had gone over to the other side. She met him with a fierce abruptness.

‘Come, man, your news!’ she said. ‘Have you any news?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Charlton said slowly; ‘I have news.’

‘Is it good or bad? Out with it.’

‘Good or bad for whom?’ he asked with provoking deliberateness. ‘For you, or for them?’

‘For me, of course. Is it good for me?’

‘Capital news for you,’ he said; ‘if your story is true, and you really want to have revenge on him.’

‘All right—that I do. Come, let’s have it.’

‘Well, you have him in your power now—that’s all; under your very feet. You can send him to penal servitude at once.’

‘Why? What has he been doing?’

‘Committing bigamy, I suppose, Charlton quietly said, ‘if your story is true; and it is true, is it not?’

‘What has he been doing?’ she said again fiercely, and going up so close to Charlton that he involuntarily drew back.

‘He has just been married,’ Charlton answered, ‘to Gabrielle Vanthorpe; to her that was Gabrielle Vanthorpe, I mean.’

‘It’s a lie,’ Paulina screamed. ‘He daren’t do it; she wouldn’t do it. Don’t you believe it, Charlton; it’s a lie.’

‘Seeing is believing. I saw them married.’

'You saw them married?'

'I saw them married; I saw them with my own eyes; I was in the church. Oh, it was quite a tip-top affair; you ought to have been there. I dare say you would have been if you had only known in time.' He sneered undisguisedly at her now.

'Look here,' she said; 'if you don't want me to do something dreadful to you, or to somebody, just tell me plain and straight where you were to-day and what you saw.'

'It's easily told. I was at the church'—he named it—'this morning, and I saw Gabrielle Vanthorpe that was, married to Clarkson Fielding that is. I saw the whole ceremony; they are married as fast and firm as church and parson can make them. Sir Wilberforce Fielding was there; and Lady Honeybell and Major Leven; and you should have seen old Lefussis in a suit of new clothes and such a flower in his button-hole! The bride looked beautiful, everyone said. She stopped to speak to me as she was leaving the church leaning on her husband's arm; I didn't want to be seen, but she stopped and saw me and spoke to me. She is as good a woman as there is under heaven: she was able to think even at that moment about saving a wretch like me. She was, indeed. Saving me!' He laughed.

Paulina did not pay much heed to this part of the story. She was thinking of other things. *

'Where have they gone?' she asked, making a movement as though she were about to rush out wildly in pursuit of them.

'They have gone off by train to Sir Wilberforce's house somewhere far down in the country; a hundred miles off, I am told. They are actually gone; I thought it would not be worth while coming to you until I could give you the news all mplete.'

'When did you know of this?'

'About the train? oh, well, I asked someone in the church, and then I went to the railway station and saw that they did actually go off—so that I might bring you all the news.'

'I don't mean about the train,' she said; 'I mean, when did you hear that they were going to be married to-day?'

'I heard it last evening; on the best authority, as people say.'

'Before you came here to me?'

'Yes; oh yes; certainly. As it happened, just before I came here to you.'

'And you kept this a secret from me?'

'Why, yes. I thought it best. You might be going to the church, perhaps, and making a disturbance, and bringing yourself into trouble. Besides, don't you see, if he is your husband, you have him completely at your mercy now, seeing that he has actually married this woman. I wouldn't spare him if I was you. He does not deserve it, if your story is true; and of course it is true, is it not?'

He spoke in such a tone as to make it perfectly plain that he knew her story to be false.

'You wretch!' she exclaimed. 'You coward!' and she heaped other opprobrious names upon him. 'You have been deceiving me all this time. You were pretending to be my friend, and you were my enemy. You were a spy for them—that's what you were.'

'Not at all,' he answered composedly. 'You will find, perhaps, that I have been your best friend. I have saved you from putting yourself in the way of being sent to the treadmill. If you had put yourself in their power one bit, they would have come down on you, don't you see? Besides, you know, what would be the good of it? You see, they didn't care twopence for anything you said; they didn't believe your story for half a minute. They were sharper than I; I was taken in for a while. Of course they knew all about it, and I didn't. But I found you out lately. You've made a bad business of it, Mrs. Vanthorpe; and you ought to be greatly obliged to me for preventing you from making it still worse. But I don't know yet what Sir Wilberforce may be inclined to do; and I think, if I were you, I wouldn't be found here any longer.'

'You were in the business as well as I,' she screamed, turning on him a face white with passion. 'You coward and sneak! You helped me; you set me on; you put things into my head; you knew as well as I did that the whole thing was only a dodge to prevent him from getting married to her; and you went into the plot with all your heart. If I suffer you shall suffer too.'

'No,' Charlton said, with a grim distortion of the lips which was too painful to be called a smile; 'I am safe enough. They can't touch me.'

'You coward!' she exclaimed. 'I suppose you have given king's evidence, or whatever they call it. You are safe? Oh, it is like you! Lord, what a fool I was! I might have seen it in your face. A coward like that couldn't even be true to his pal.'

'I haven't given any evidence to anyone,' he said. 'I

didn't mean that I was safe in that way. If you like to go and give king's evidence, as you call it, and try to get off, I think it wouldn't be half a bad thing. You may say, if you like, that I was a party to the whole plot. So I was; I don't deny it; I shan't find any fault with you if you go before any magistrate and tell the story from first to last.'

Charlton expected with almost every word he spoke that she would actually make a furious assault upon him, and, what with her strength and her desperation and his physical weakness, he did not believe his life would be safe in her hands. But somehow the crisis was too great for any mere burst of personal fury to satisfy Paulina. Her passion was not equal to any adequate expression of her wrongs, her complete discomfiture, her betrayal, her utter failure. She threw her arms once wildly about almost as one does who suddenly falls into deep water; and then she sat in a chair, and leant her elbows on the table, and covered her face with her large white hands. Suddenly she looked up and waved one of her hands at him; an imperious gesture as if she were pushing him from her; and she said in a hoarse voice:

'Get away, man! Get right away out of this! I don't want to be seen in this state by a fellow like you. Get away, I tell you, or it will be worse for you! Get away!'

Then she put her head down again and did not look up until she knew that he was gone. He went without saying a word, and he was never seen by her again.

As soon as he had gone she gave full way to one of those tropical bursts of furious passion in which she seldom indulged except when alone. She knew quite well that the indulgence was necessary to her getting any such self-control again as would enable her to think over her situation with any tolerable degree of cool judgment. At last the tempest racked itself out, and she found, when she came to think things over, that her one predominant desire was for revenge upon Robert Charlton. She could forgive everybody now but him. She even began to persuade herself that she owed something, after all, to that good sweet Gabrielle, and to be sorry that she had ever done a thing to harm the kind dear creature. She wrought herself at length into a mood of very sweet penitence, and out of sheer goodness convinced herself that she was bound to minister to her own revenge. She dressed herself anew and with much care. She had had a light silk dress on; she now arrayed herself in solemn black velvet with white lace collar and hardly any ornaments—a kind of 'Mourning Bride' or 'Fair Penitent' sort of

garb. Paulina remembered having seen in her early days some stately tragedy queen arrayed in such a style when she appeared in some scene which was intended to illustrate the dignity of complete repentance and self-surrender. She put on a heavy black veil which was to shroud her face until the moment should come for lifting it and allowing someone to see that the self-denounced offender was not altogether without charm. Paulina had been in the days of her youth a barmaid in the immediate neighbourhood of Bow Street, and, like most young women thus circumstanced, she had a familiar knowledge of the ways and the business hours of the London police courts. She knew that her present residence was actually within the jurisdiction of Bow Street. So when all her make-up was satisfactorily concluded she sent for a cab—a heavy four-wheeler, because, though she hated that kind of conveyance, yet she felt that the sprightly hansom was quite unsuited to the business of repentance and self-denunciation. She drove to Bow Street, had an interview with the sitting magistrate, accused herself of being a party to a conspiracy, told him the full details, and gave the name of the Surrey-side lodging-house keeper and that of Robert Charlton as her accomplices and fellow-conspirators. The story at first seemed incredible and absurd, and Paulina's manner filled the magistrate with the conviction that he had to do with a lunatic. Her tragic air was something tremendous. She demanded to be conducted forthwith to a dungeon; only stipulating that her accomplice and betrayer, as she called Robert Charlton, should be conducted, for his part, to a similar lodging.

'Worthy magistrate,' the fair penitent exclaimed, 'look on me! I am not mad. Do not think it. I am a child of misfortune, and I have fallen into the hands of plotters, and I have been induced to join in a wicked plot against one who was all kindness to me. Scorn me; I deserve it all; but do not refuse to believe my story. Hasten and let the innocent be saved before it is too late. I am not mad; no, by Heaven, I am not mad!'

She sank into a chair and felt that this was a scene worthy of a heroine. The magistrate sent for Sir Wilberforce Fielding and Major Leven, and, having talked with them, came to the conclusion that Paulina was not mad and that there was something in her story.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

'ONE MINDED LIKE THE WEATHER, MOST UNQUIETLY.'

EVENING was setting in as Robert Charlton returned to Bolingbroke Place. A change had come over the day; there was something strange and ominous in the atmosphere and in the sky. Heavy yellow clouds showing as if charged with thunder were coming together slowly and settling along the horizon. An uncanny light gleamed from beneath their edges. The air was thick; there seemed a kind of yellow fog abroad; only it was not like the familiar visitation of our November days, any more than it resembled the golden haze of the Campagna or Thrasymentis. A storm of some sort appeared about to burst in thunder and rain, and yet it did not come. It exhaled, one might have thought, in the curious yellow haze, and was dissipated unwholesomely abroad. People passing along the streets sometimes stopped and looked up amazed at the unusual appearance of the sky and the clouds. It must be something very unusual that can attract the ordinary Londoner to look up at the sky. A cab-horse down, or a man having his boots blacked, or a woman raising a window, will attract him fast enough, and indeed will hold him from the pursuit of his journey as Punch and Judy hold an errand-boy. But there must be something wonderful going on in the sky before it will strike him as calling for observation. This evening, people did stop to look up at the sky, and they then usually looked down hastily at the pavement, expecting to see it flecked with great raindrops; and forthwith glanced up at the sky again as if seeking there for explanation of something that puzzled them. Some hurried on as if to escape from the expected downpour; and then after a moment or two, seeing that no downpour appeared to be coming, they slackened their pace and looked as if they had not expected anything in particular. As Robert Charlton turned down Bolingbroke Place its aspect was very peculiar, for its narrowness allowed it to be completely canopied by one of the thick yellow clouds. Charlton walked up to the door under this strange unwholesome ill-omened roof of cloud. He looked up once or twice, and hastily looked down again as if he did not like the sight.

He opened the door with his latch-key and went in. Before the door of what were Fielding's rooms he stopped for a moment

and listened. All was silence. He tried the door. It was unlocked as usual. He opened it and looked in. The rooms were evidently unoccupied still. If Lefussis meant to have them, he had not made any way in their occupation yet. All the things that Fielding owned were gone, and the rooms were reduced to their ordinary London-lodging condition. Charlton stood for a moment thinking how badly things had gone with him since first he used to enter those rooms; how happily all had turned out for Fielding, and how miserably for him. He saw everything now in cold clear light; he had no more illusions about himself or anyone else. He now saw Fielding only as kind, generous, and manly; his own ignoble jealousies about Janet appeared to him exactly what they might have appeared to any impartial observer. He saw that every evil that had come on him had come by his own fault, by his own direct action and invocation. He had persistently turned kindness into unkindness and interpreted good as evil. He had allowed himself to be possessed of devils. He had invited them, and they came at last. Yet he did not feel exactly repentant. He had only a dull pervading sensation that everything had gone wrong, and that he was the cause of it all; that he had himself to blame. But he had not the moral energy to blame himself in the healthy way of one who is resolved that if he has done harm he will try to atone for it, and that if he has fallen he will try to get up again. He had, indeed, a vague sense of satisfaction in having completely thwarted Paulina, and thus done some service, however small, to Gabrielle; and there was just enough of a better soul left in him to make him feel a certain satisfaction in the thought that Gabrielle would never know it was he who had done this much good. He was proud, that is to say, that his attempt to do her a service was wholly unrecognised and unrewarded. But he had no true repentant purpose. He had no thought of the one only way by which he could have made his repentance of some account to others—of trying to redeem his life and retrieve himself, and win back the affection and confidence of his wife and make her happy. His nature had not the moral fibre for this. It was too limp and nerveless. All he felt was that he was good for nothing any more.

So he closed the door of the room again, and he dragged heavily up the stairs. Through each window, as he mounted, the yellow atmosphere showed itself with what seemed to him a baleful glare. As he rose somewhat high he came to a landing with a window from which he could just see the tops of two trees far away somewhere; he could see them against the sky, and

nothing else. His mind went back to a time when he lived with his father and mother in a small London room, very high up, from the window of which he could just see the tips of two trees that seemed to him then to be growing in the land of romance and of youth, and of the strange sweet adventures which fanciful boyhood expects vaguely for coming manhood's days. He used to think wonderingly of what was on the other side of those trees, and how they could be reached, and whether he should reach them, and what exquisite experiences of love and struggle and strictly romantic heroic suffering and final success he should have when he got there. The odd idea struck him that perhaps these were the same two trees now seen from another point of view. 'I have got to the other side now indeed,' Charlton thought as he turned away; 'and this is what I have come to. This is the other side. This is the end.'

He went into his room and sat down and fell into a kind of half-torpid reverie. After a while—he did not know how long it was—he was startled by a knock at the door. The idea of his having further communication with the outer world seemed unnatural to him. He got up slowly and let in Mr. Lefussis.

The face of Lefussis was beaming with joy.

'I saw you at the church to-day, Charlton,' he said. 'I didn't see your wife, by the way. She isn't unwell, I hope?'

'No,' Charlton answered; 'she isn't unwell.'

'Was she there?'

'She is staying with her aunt; her aunt is Mrs. Bramble—a servant at the house of the lady who was married to-day; a housekeeper; that's the same as a servant, isn't it? I dare say my wife has told you of it often enough. She is not very good at keeping secrets.' The coming of Lefussis seemed to have sent Charlton back into all the old ignoble realisms, the petulances and jealousies, and the rest.

'If it was a secret,' the chivalric Lefussis declared, 'I am convinced Mrs. Charlton could be relied upon to keep it locked in her breast against the tortures of all the tyrants in the world. But I honour her for not thinking it necessary to make any secret of the highly respectable and responsible position occupied by her aunt in the household of a most charming and a most distinguished lady. At the same time, Charlton, I think it right to observe that your wife never said anything to me on the subject that I can recollect. She doubtless did not think it necessary.'

'Very well,' Charlton said listlessly.

'Was it not a touching sight to-day?' Lefussis went on.

How charming she looked ! how sweet and modest ! And what a noble fellow he is ! They have the good wishes of all who know them. May I say, Charlton, my good friend, without seeming to soar too much into the rhetorical, that the good wishes of all who know them follow them into their new life as the plaudits of the delighted audience follow into his retirement for the night the great actor who has given them so much pleasure ?'

'That would not have been bad for a speech at a wedding breakfast,' Charlton grimly observed. 'Was it prepared with any such view ?'

'The same cynic as ever !' Lefussis said with eyes of beaming good nature. 'Still the same ! Even the nuptials of the beautiful and the brave don't win him for a moment away into more genial words ! But I don't mind, Charlton ; I know it is only words with you, this little cynicism ; I know what a substratum of kindly feeling is beneath all that rugged surface. Yes, yes ; the man who has the adoration of that dear little wife of yours must have some right to it. Well, well, I was glad to see you there to-day ; though I hadn't any opportunity of getting near you. If I had been near you, I would have asked if you had ever heard anything more of that odd vulgar woman who made these absurd charges against our friend Clarkson Fielding ? Has she absconded ?'

'I know nothing about her, now.'

'No, no, of course you wouldn't know anything about her yourself ; but I thought you might have heard, perhaps. It is an odd thing that from the first moment I saw that woman I set her down as a liar of the first magnitude. I hope Fielding will have the firmness to prosecute her to the utmost extent of the law's rigour. I told him so more than once. It isn't any personal affair of his ; if it were, I should be for mercy as well as anyone ; but it is a public duty ; it is for the public safety. Think how that woman got taken up as a sort of leader of a movement here ; and think of the harm that may be brought on any good and great cause by such a creature. No, no ; the utmost rigour of the law ought to be administered to her—to her and her accomplices, whoever they may be. You agree with me, Charlton, my good friend ?'

'If I were an accomplice of hers,' Charlton said, 'I should take care to get outside the reach of justice.'

'Quite so ; yes ; you think the case so clear against her ? You are right, Charlton ; quite right. Well, to pass to other topics. Do you observe, Charlton, that I am somewhat in good spirits to-day, more than usual ?'

'You do seem to me to be very happy,' Charlton said, looking at him curiously. 'You seem out of place in this dismal old room.'

'Dismal? Oh, come, dismal!—"stone walls do not a prison make," you know. When Mrs. Charlton is here, her presence gilds these—ah, ah—spaces, let us say. But I am somewhat radiant. First, I am delighted at the auspicious marriage of our two dear friends; and in the next instance I have some good news of my own.'

Charlton, with one hand screening his eyes, looked up at him with a certain melancholy curiosity. The gaunt figure of Lefussis had in it ordinarily something that roused in Robert Charlton a sense of the ridiculous. He always looked with great contempt upon Lefussis, and did not give to his accounts of interviews with high officials any credit for even that basis of truth which they really possessed, and which the uncontrolled imagination of poor Lefussis piled up with the very palaces and Taj-Mahals of political responsibility. It is not difficult for a pushing self-conceited person in London, who is always busy in the political crowd, to get to an occasional interview with some great official; and when Lefussis was admitted to speech of a secretary of state, he took the civil commonplaces of bored officialism for private and confidential communications. Charlton did not believe in his good news now. * His melancholy curiosity was only for the poor creature who allowed himself to be gulled with vain imaginings.

'Yes,' Lefussis said; 'congratulate me, Charlton; I have got an appointment. At last; at last.'

'Indeed? That is, you have been promised an appointment don't you mean?'

'No, no; more than that. Quite different, my dear friend. I have had private assurance that the place is at my disposal. Just the very thing I should have wished for; *hoc erat in votis*, Charlton! The place of assistant-deputy administrator of the St. Xavier's Settlements, where my dear friend Victor Heron was administrator once. I had the news to-day in confidence from Sir Wilberforce Fielding himself.'

Charlton now began to be really surprised. This was something like substance

'Yes, indeed. The fact is, it was he who took the thing in hand; inspired, I need hardly say, by my dear friends Clarkson and Gabrielle Fielding. He has ever so many powerful friends, and he doesn't do anything in politics himself, and never asks a favour; so of course, when he said a word for an old colonial

servant like myself, who was unjustly treated by a former government, the thing was done. Yes; I am to go out almost immediately. A splendid thing, Charlton; salary and emoluments come to quite five hundred a year. Five hundred a year, Charlton; think of that. Why, my dear fellow, I am not ashamed to say that for years back I have seldom been in a position to expend much more than fifty pounds a year.'

There was a twinkle of moisture in the eyes of Lefussis. He turned away for a moment. Then he resumed his former position.

'Well, that's the good news, Charlton,' he said; 'and I was anxious to tell you first thing. I knew I could count on your congratulations. We are old friends; and I may say we have tasted of the cup of adversity together. I say we *have* tasted of it, because I am well assured that for you there is prosperity in store. You are young; you have energy; you have talents, sir—great artistic talents; and you have friends who will stand by you until you can stand up for yourself. Your course, Charlton, is clear.'

'So it is,' Charlton said. 'My course is clear.'

'I am delighted to hear you say so.' Lefussis was not a particularly observant person, and he followed Charlton's words without noticing the manner in which they were spoken. 'I knew it, of course, but I am to be made sure. Thank Heaven, then, we are all in a fair way. And so we are all leaving this old place! It will know us no more, Charlton. Fielding is gone; and I am going; and you will go next. Well, I hope three good fellows will come in our places and be prosperous too in their turn. Good evening, Charlton, my dear friend. You will give my compliments to your wife, won't you?'

'When I see her,' Charlton said.

'I may look in upon you to-morrow morning as I pass,' Lefussis said, 'if I have any further news.'

'I am going to be locked in and very busy all to-morrow,' Charlton answered without looking up.

'Oh, indeed? very good; to-morrow evening then, perhaps, somewhere about this hour.'

'If you knock about this hour to-morrow evening,' said Charlton, 'and I hear you, I'll open the door and shall be glad to see you. I can promise you that much.'

'Oh, I'll make you hear me fast enough.'

'You may have to knock loudly.'

'Why so, my dear friend? are you likely to be asleep?' Lefussis asked, turning back as he was about to leave the room,

and for the first time looking at Charlton with a certain surprise or curiosity.

‘I may be asleep,’ Charlton said; ‘very likely.’

‘Then why should I disturb you, my dear friend?’

‘You will not disturb me.’

Lefussis stopped for a moment uncertain; but Charlton had buried his head in his work again, and did not appear inclined to carry on any more conversation. Lefussis was not a very keen observer of men. He studied the affairs of continents and of nations only. But he was dimly conscious of something odd in the manner of Charlton which impressed him with a certain uncomfortable sensation, and which he was able to recall very vividly afterwards. For the moment, however, he paid no further attention to it. He asked Charlton if he had noticed the strange look of the evening, and he predicted a storm. Then he said good-night and went to his own room, to sit there alone and meditate for hours on the bright future which he saw at length expanding before him, and which was to repay him for so many years of hope deferred.

When Lefussis had gone, Charlton sat for some time thinking. Then he got up and began to put things in order as if he were preparing the place for some new tenant. He kept going in and out of the two rooms incessantly, arranging every article of dress or furniture in its proper place. Once it so happened that in his arrangements he brought a cloak which Janet had left behind her out of the bedroom and put it for the time on a chair in the sitting-room. He forgot it there apparently, and it was allowed to rest on the chair while he went on with his self-appointed labour. He had now a lamp lighted in each room; but the lamps were not fully turned on, and the light was dim. Once, as he came out of the bedroom, his eyes fell upon the chair with the cloak on it; and his surprised imagination filled the cloak with the familiar form, and for the moment he actually thought that Janet herself was there. He gave a shrill cry, like that of a restless sleeper, and called ‘Janet, Janet!’ and then the empty cloak became an empty cloak again, and he took it up and threw it aside with a growl of contempt for his outbreak of imagination. When he had got everything into such order as seemed to him fitting, he went into the bedroom, locked the door, carefully closed the windows, and covered over their crevices with table-covers and such-like articles; and stuffed the chimney with old garments, and stopped up the keyholes.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE NIGHT OF STORM.

THE storm broke at last on London ; and broke in fury. So wild a storm had not been felt in the metropolis for many a year. It was more like some tornado in the tropics than an outburst of bad weather in moderate London. It came first with a fierce downpour of rain which swept over the streets like the rush of a great stream bursting its bounds ; and there was blue lightning, and a wind that made steeples rock, and seemed as if it meant to uproot the trees in the quiet parks wholly unused to such passionate vehemence. When the rain ceased, the wind only grew still more fierce and furious. It was about ten o'clock when the rain set in, and by eleven the hurricane was blowing. It soon swept the streets well-nigh clear of passengers. Those who had to fare home in despite of it found themselves blown round corners and glad to cling to lamp-posts, even though these supporters shook and creaked and rattled in the blast. The crossing of a bridge was a formidable piece of work even for a stout man. Here and there a little party would be seen returning southward from one of the theatres, two men and a woman perhaps, and their efforts to get across one of the bridges seemed like the enterprise of Bruce's everlasting spider, so often were they beaten back and so sturdily and good-humouredly did they try the attempt again. The men put the woman between them, and with her clinging to each they boldly breasted the gale. They were driven back, and they were compelled to swirl round, to turn sideways, edgeways, any way to get out of the full force of the wind. Then they made a rush when there was a little lull and got a certain way, and so, no doubt, at last accomplished the passage with much laughter and screaming and rustling of skirts and wild clutching of hats. The boats and barges under the bridges were torn from their moorings and dashed against each other with creaking and groaning that sounded sometimes like the agony of human beings drowning in some darksome pool. There was a high tide, too, to make matters worse, and on the low-lying south side the water flooded many of the houses and drove the inmates into the howling and rain-scourged streets for shelter.

In many houses that were not at all shaky or in danger people sat up half the night watching and shivering and not

knowing what to do—afraid to remain indoors and not liking to trust themselves to the wet and windy streets, with, after all, perhaps, no real peril to their roofs to warrant any precipitation. These were, however, only the nervous few. People in general only thought of the storm as having a possible danger for other persons, perhaps even in other towns, or out at sea, but did not think it had any particular application to themselves. Perhaps the only serious danger was for old and unsteady houses that stood alone or at the end of a row or at a corner, and against which, therefore, the wind was free to blow with all its strength. There was not a great deal of harm done. Here and there a house or part of a house fell in, and then there was wild consternation all through that quarter, and report ran that half London was being blown down, and people swarmed into the streets until the moment of alarm passed away and they one by one crept under cover again. The storm had at least given good warning, and there was time for those to get away who feared that their roofs would not hold up over their heads. There was crash and noise enough everywhere to keep alarm alive and prevent people from being taken unawares.

Slates and bricks and chimney-pots were falling here and there; many an old sign-post which had swung for generations uninjured came clattering to the ground. In dull old out-of-the-way streets there were ancient public-houses with signs bearing names which carried one back a generation or two in the history of popular hero-worship; where the 'Admiral Rodney' or the 'Sidney Smith' or the 'Regent's Arms' emblazoned on a swinging board told of a steady-going business that did not trouble itself about new ways and new heroes. In many such places the old signs came tumbling down, and were never put up again. They might have remained there for ever, only for the storm; but when they actually did come down, the owners suddenly discovered that it was time to make a change and to move with the age. More than one 'Beaconsfield Arms' and 'Cyprus House' dates from that storm and the falls that it brought along with it.

Janet Charlton was one of those whom the storm alarmed, although hardly for herself. She was well housed in Gabrielle's little dwelling, and though the trees were blown about with much crash and disturbance, yet the possibility of anything happening to the house itself, beyond at most the fall of a chimney-pot, could hardly have occurred even to nervous and timorous Janet. But it had been a melancholy day with her. She was sincerely delighted at Gabrielle's happiness: she

would have gladdened at anything that gave her and Fielding any joy. Yet the marriage and its surroundings could not but fill poor Janet's heart with thoughts of her own marriage, her own disappointments, her own misery and loneliness, and she shed many a tear as she moped through the deserted rooms. They had a specially deserted air just now; for Mrs. Leven had sent at once and dismantled the memorial room, and had every relic of Albert Vanthorpe carried away from the place. All this gave such an appearance to a house as it might have when a dead body is borne out of it in its coffin. The dismantled room had a dismal fascination for poor Janet, who kept haunting it as sadly as a ghost might have done, and truly to as little purpose as ghosts usually have when frequenting drearily the houses of the living. When the sun faded out of the sky and the yellow ominous clouds began to cover up everything with a sulphurous pall, Janet got to think that the end of the world, or something very like it, must surely be at hand; and when at last the storm burst, it found her with shattered nerves, all terror-stricken anticipation and agony of fear. Mrs. Bramble was an early woman, and was somewhat displeased to see, as she passed Janet's room, that the light was streaming from under the door. She knocked at the door and, without waiting for any answer, opened it and went in, and found Janet fully dressed and looking out of the window with uneasy eyes. This seemed to Mrs. Bramble highly irregular; and she always held to the opinion that when the mistress of a house was absent, things ought to go on with special regularity. Otherwise she thought there would be a sort of defection of duty.

Mrs. Bramble was not able to speak without a certain sharpness of tone when she saw Janet fully dressed at such an hour.

'Goodness gracious, child! whatever are you doing there? Why ain't you in bed asleep? Don't you know it's past eleven?'

'I can't sleep, aunt; I don't like to go to bed. Don't you hear the storm how it rages among the trees?'

'I hear the wind, sure enough; and it's dreadful; but you and I can't stop it, Janet; and it won't do us any harm. This house won't be blown down, you may be sure of that.'

'No; I wasn't thinking of that, aunt; I was thinking——'

'Yes; what were you thinking of?'

'I was thinking—of Robert. I wonder if any harm has happened to him?'

'Goodness, Janet! not a bit, you may be sure. What harm could happen to him? You don't suppose the wind would blow

him away, do you? You may set your mind at rest about him ; nothing ever happens to that sort of man.'

'I don't know ; I feel uneasy ; I can't tell why, but I ain' afraid something bad is happening to Robert.'

Mrs. Bramble grew impatient.

'Janet, you are too absurd. Why are you thinking about that man at all ? I dare say he isn't thinking about you.'

'I don't know,' poor Janet said ; 'perhaps he isn't ; I can't help that ; I am thinking about him. I am sure we shall hear some bad news of him soon. Why is there such a storm at such a time ? and why was the sky so yellow all the evening, aunt ? it isn't natural.'

Mrs. Bramble gave a little impatient laugh.

'My good girl, I ain't anything of a weather-prophet, and I don't know why the sky was yellow or why the storm came. I suppose Providence sends storms when it sees fit, and makes the sky any colour it likes. But I can tell you one thing for certain : the sky wasn't yellow nor the storm didn't come because of your husband or anything about him. He ain't of quite so much importance as all that, I can assure you.'

'I didn't mean that,' said Janet ; 'I only meant that when such strange things happen, people get frightened—women do, and they think perhaps something is happening to those they care about. Robert don't deserve it of me ; but I can't help thinking of him to-night. Aunt, do you think I could go to him ?'

'Go to him ? to-night ? at this hour of the night ?'

'Yes, aunt ; it is not so very late. If I could just go and make sure that he was well——'

'You silly goose ! Of course you can't go at this hour of the night. Who is to go with you ? and how could you get in there if you did go ? and how do you know he is there ? How do you know what sort of a welcome you would get if you saw him ?'

'I don't know ; I dare say he wouldn't like it——'

'You may be sure he wouldn't. Go to bed, there's a good girl, and we'll talk it over in the morning.'

'I suppose that is the best thing to do,' Janet said despondently. 'I am sorry for troubling you, aunt ; but I got so full of strange fancies, somehow.'

'Please, Janet, don't tell me of any strange fancies at this time of night ; I don't want to be put from my sleep. I have something to do to-morrow, and I can't afford to lose my night's rest.'

Janet plaintively acknowledged the practical justice of this

appeal, and she learned from the increasing acerbity of her aunt's tone of voice that it was time to bring the dialogue to a close. Mrs. Bramble was a thoroughly kind and good woman, but she had very little sympathy with people's fancies. She was an efficient woman, and much prided herself on her efficiency; and she was strongly of opinion that if people wanted to be of any use in the world, they had better not trouble themselves and their friends with such things as fancies.

Janet made no further remonstrance. But she did not go to bed or to sleep just then. She stood at the window and tried to peer into the wild night, and shuddered at every new roar of the wind and crash of the trees, and endeavoured to make out in what direction lay Bolingbroke Place, and wondered if Robert was there, and if he was sorry that she was not with him.

The wind certainly was blowing with peculiar ferocity and effect over Bolingbroke Place. It will be remembered that Bolingbroke Place consisted of one row of tall old decaying houses, with a long wall in front of them and another wall stopping up the thoroughfare at the end. Bolingbroke Place was, in fact, only a lane or a court, with a row of houses for one side and a dead wall for the other. The wall screened one of the drear old gardens of the institutions with which the region abounded, and now over this wall the wind was free to blow with all its might and main in the face of the row of houses. The house in which Charlton lived was the last in the row, and had therefore an unprotected side as well as an unprotected front. It was always a shaky and decaying old structure. The reader will perhaps remember the shuddering sensation which came over Gabrielle the first time she turned into Bolingbroke Place and saw its grey and mournful old walls, with the gaunt doorways and the crumbling steps. The wind now made wild work among the chimney-pots and in and out of the corridors and along the rattling window-sashes of the forlorn old building. One need not have been very nervous to feel some alarm when with every fresh spasm of the storm the old house strained and shivered and creaked almost as much as a ship might in a mid-Atlantic gale. But the occupants of the house were, for the most part, of the happy-go-lucky, or the unhappy-go-unlucky, order, who did not trouble themselves much with thinking what was likely to come next, but waited indifferently and let things take their way. It did not appear as if the fierceness of the storm much troubled Robert Charlton. No sound came from his rooms after he had locked himself in. Nor did Mr. Lefussis at first pay much attention to the raging of the gale

and the rattling of the window-panes and sashes. He had something else to think of. He was at once working and dreaming. He was making preparations for his new career, and he was indulging in the most delightful fancies as to its successes. His work of arranging and packing might have been easily done, only that when he had made any arrangement complete as he thought, he instantly found that it was all wrong and had to be gone over again. What with this constant work of doing and undoing and his delicious dreams of future success, fame, and happiness, the hours passed away quickly enough, and he had not much leisure to think of the storm that raged outside, and indeed pervaded very palpably the howling corridors and the gusty chambers. In truth, Lefussis was not in Bolingbroke Place at all. He was away in soft islands amid languishing southern seas, where all manner of injustice had long been wrought on benign natives, and where he, Jasper Lefussis, had come to undo all the wrong and earn a monument more lasting than brass.

One tremendous rush of the wind, greater and fiercer than any that had gone before, startled Lefussis back to the substantial world of present London. In all fierce gusts of wind in a city there are blended sounds that seem like cries of human agony and the crash of falling buildings, and Lefussis thought he heard some such sounds now. Could any chimney or gables have fallen near him? It was a terribly ancient and shaky quarter, he knew, in which Bolingbroke Place stood, and Bolingbroke Place was about the shakiest of all, and the particular house which held Lefussis he might have assumed to be the most rickety tenement of the whole region. Still, Lefussis was not thinking of that house; no one expects that anything is going to happen to the house he lives in. But when this tremendous roar of wind came, Lefussis felt the floor beneath him tremble and shake, and for a moment it occurred to him that the shock of an earthquake was passing over the place. But the loud, splitting, crashing sound was too near to be the echo of any far-off convulsion; and suddenly Lefussis saw to his horror that a wall before him was distinctly parting in two, near its juncture with another wall. The first impression of humanity on seeing any entirely strange sight is to regard it as something quite in the ordinary course of things, and Lefussis must have gazed, for a full second of time at the sundering wall before it occurred to him to think of the meaning of that portentous spectacle. Then he jumped to his feet and ran into the passage, crying out that the house was falling. He ran to the door of Charlton's room,

and beat and kicked at it, and shouted to Charlton to get up, and he tried to drive in the door with might and main, but it was firmly locked inside, and he could not force it open; it seemed the one firm thing in all that tottering tenement. He found the passages now filled with excited people dressed, half-dressed, hardly dressed at all, making for the stairs and the street as for bare life. Giving one last and useless kick at Charlton's door, Lefussis ran downstairs too.

Some of the rooms in the house were fortunately unoccupied; and there were not many women or children there at any time. Bolingbroke-Place lodgers were usually persons of somewhat ready and self-sufficing ways; and they were quick to get out of any difficulty with very little notice. The old house kept heaving and cracking a good deal before it finally collapsed. Rafters and beams were heard to snap, and volumes of antique dust poured forth on every side. Ancient wainscotings groaned and creaked, and at last broke up and sent affrighted rats scampering in whisking haste all over the crashing floors. The inmates had good warning, therefore, and were some of them already out in the street, and some even in the square beyond, when the upper floors were heard to give way and to fall with a half-smothered crash like an avalanche whose voice is stifled in the new masses of snow which receive it in its descent. Everyone was safely out of the danger except Robert Charlton. In the confusion, not many thought of him; and when he was thought of, people were not even certain whether he was in the house at the time; everyone knew that he was out a great deal of nights lately; and although Lefussis had seen him in the evening, yet it was well known that it was not until a much later hour that he usually went out. It seemed at first, therefore, highly probable that he too had escaped the ruin. Lefussis was able to say that although he had risked his own life by waiting to give the alarm to Charlton, and although he had knocked and kicked and shouted with an energy that might have wakened the famous Seven Sleepers themselves, he had not received any answer or heard the faintest-sound of life stirring in Charlton's room. So it was set down for the moment as certain that Charlton too had escaped, and that no one had been harmed by the sudden fall of the house. For the house was down; the old tenement in Bolingbroke Place, where Gabrielle first met her lover, was a shapeless heap of unpicturesque ruins.

When the ruins came to be explored, it was found that Charlton had not escaped. But although his body was found buried beneath a mound of fallen masonry, it was not certain

that he had died a victim to the accident. From a few evidences left behind him it was inferred by some that he had intended to kill himself that night with charcoal in the painless French fashion—his temperament always shrank from pain; but it was not certain whether he had accomplished his purpose in his own way, or had been anticipated by the storm and the fall of the house. Lefussis was of opinion that Charlton had done the work, or at least was doing it, when he knocked and tried to save him; and that he was then too stupefied to answer, or else was actually dead. But he did not say much about this. It would be less painful for Janet and for others, he thought, if it were still possible to believe that Charlton was merely the victim of an accident; and for once Lefussis knew how to hold his tongue.

The death of Robert Charlton, it may be said at once, put a stop to any further proceedings in the matter of Paulina and her confession. Paulina was allowed to go her ways; nobody cared to punish her. She returned to the United States and took to the stage in New Orleans. She was generally understood to have some romantic story, people did not precisely know what; but it was assumed to have something to do with a secret marriage, a conspiracy, and the British aristocracy. There was a somewhat general impression that if she had her rights she would have been called Lady Paulina; and indeed some persons among her acquaintance did address her by that title, and she did not reprehend them. Many biographies of her appeared in the Southern papers, the particulars of which were for the most part inexact. A mysterious halo of fame surrounded the Lady Paulina, and the Lady Paulina enjoyed it.

CHAPTER XL.

‘FAREWELL, YE LOVERS; THE SWEET DAY IS YOURS.’

WE may be allowed to turn back a few hours in the story. It is evening; and Clarkson and Gabrielle Fielding are alone in the grounds around Sir Wilberforce's house in the country. They had travelled down an easy run of a hundred miles or so, and found themselves now as far away from all associations of London as though they were in the heart of some far-off country. They had had all the singular beauty of the day during their journey; they seemed to have travelled away even from the promises of storm which had been brooding over London and were to be fulfilled at last. It is needless to say that they were

very happy. Perhaps there was a certain sense of security in their happiness which is not given even to all true lovers. Each had peculiarities of character which marked the one as a man, the other as a woman, unlike others. Clarkson Fielding knew perfectly well that he had found in Gabrielle the one woman whom he could love and live with, whom he could recognise as his appointed companion for life; and he knew that he would love her always as well as he knew that he would like sunshine and the summer always. To Gabrielle her love and her marriage came as a positive rescue from a life of which she was growing weary. A new life in the true sense was opening on her; a life of genuine deep love, and therefore, come what might, of happiness. The reality of the past seemed at its best but a dull dream and a mistake. Now for the first time she seemed to live and to have a motive for living.

The new life could not have begun more delightfully than among those ancient quiet trees in the evening. Clarkson had not seen the place for years, and it gave him great pleasure to go over it with Gabrielle now and to tell her of the many associations he had with this room and that, this path among the woods or the other. He was not without a certain penitential feeling as he went over the house in which he had been so mutinous and discontented, and he told Gabrielle that there were many spots at which he felt inclined to stop and, after the example of Dr. Johnson, stand bareheaded for penance.

'The truth is, I was a terribly mutinous young fool, Gabrielle. I didn't like anything. Why I so hated the name of Clarkson then I can't imagine. Now, when you call me Clarkson, it sounds like music, Gabrielle.'

'Yes; but I suppose that is different,' Gabrielle said; and then she stopped, as if she had been saying something in her own praise.

'Well, it is rather different,' he said. 'And then, Gabrielle, think, after all, if I had not been so mutinous what might have happened. I should probably have never left my father's house—I should never have gone knocking about the world; I should have been a good boy here at home with Wilberforce, and then——'

'Yes, and then?'

'Well, then I should probably never have gone to Bolingbroke Place; and I might never have seen you.'

'Oh, but I don't think that would be possible,' Gabrielle said quite earnestly. 'I know we must have met somewhere; I don't believe that things are left to chance like that.'

'Well, suppose we had met in some drawing-room somewhere, in the regular way. You wouldn't have felt the slightest interest in me; I never should have known poor Philip Vanthorpe, and you would never have mistaken me for him; and I should have had nothing to tell you which could have interested you in the least; and I should have been to you like any other young man.'

'At first perhaps; but not after.'

'But there would only be the "at first;" for I should have had nothing to tell you which would have interested you and led on to any "after." You wouldn't have sent for me to your house and thought I was a poor artist of some kind, and tried to do me a good turn, and won my heart in that way—No, I don't mean that either, for I fell madly in love with you the moment I saw you on the steps at Bolingbroke Place. But you would never have given a second thought to me; and you would have fallen in love with someone else.'

'No; that could never have been,' Gabrielle said. 'If you and I had not met, I never should have cared for anyone on this earth. I should have led a lonely life, and gradually outlived all my illusions, and found that I could not do much in the world to make life worth having, and perhaps taken to ritualism in the end from merely not knowing what else to do with myself. Or I might have talked a pessimism all of my own making, like Claudia Lemuel.'

'I shall always celebrate as my birthday,' Fielding said, 'the day I first met you on the steps at Bolingbroke Place.'

'Do you know the exact day?' Gabrielle asked.

'Know it? I should think I did. I am not likely to forget it. I have marked it down in white in the calendar of my life. Know the exact day? Why, I began life on that day. I will tell you the date, Gabrielle, and you shall keep it as my birthday too.'

'You need not tell me the day,' Gabrielle said, blushing slightly. 'I know it.'

'I love Bolingbroke Place,' Fielding said, 'and yet I don't want to see it any more.'

'Nor I. I never wished to see it after that last day when we saw *her* there. I only want it to live in my memory now as it once was. I said farewell to it that last day, hoping never to see it again.'

They indulged in a good deal of such speculation as they lounged under the trees. Do lovers newly married really talk much about their love? I am inclined to think they do not; that they are shy and timid in their new relationship; and that only by

little occasional glimpses do they come upon the one great theme that occupies the heart of each. Gabrielle and Fielding 'd'r' not talk a great deal about their love in direct words that evening; they touched upon it, for the most part, by indirect allusion, by reference to this day and that, this event and that, which bore upon their fate. A certain tender reticence, perhaps, was most truly consistent with happiness like theirs and temperaments like theirs. Now and then some half-articulate, wholly irrepressible expression of emotion would testify to the reality of youth and the fervour of love; but in truth the things we feel most deeply seldom get spoken in this world. Besides, each knew what the other felt; words could not have made it more clear.

While they were loitering through Wilberforce's woods and gardens, a telegram from Wilberforce himself was brought to Clarkson. It contained some important news.

'Need not think of going to New Orleans. Woman Vanthorpe has confessed her whole story a plot. Don't trouble about this, and don't come back. Time enough; only I thought you would like to know. Will write to-morrow.'

'She became repentant,' Gabrielle exclaimed. 'I thought that would be so. I don't think she had a bad heart, after all.'

Fielding did not say a word to disturb Gabrielle's charitable belief. But he did not himself believe that the confession had been brought about by pure repentance. He thought it much more likely that someone who had been concerned in the plot with Paulina had proved untrustworthy or seemed likely to do so, and that Paulina had found it convenient, for some reason or other, to anticipate a revelation. It was, however, a great relief to him to think that there would be no necessity for him to begin his married life by an expedition to New Orleans, and he readily undertook to promise to Gabrielle that so far as it was in his power he would endeavour to prevent any punishment from falling on Paulina. He was not by any means satisfied that to make such a promise was acting the part of a truly good citizen and a public-spirited man. He greatly doubted whether Solon or Socrates would have consented to such a leniency towards the wrongdoer; but at the moment he thought a good deal more of the happiness of Gabrielle than of Solon or Socrates.

'Very good. We will leave her,' Fielding said gravely, 'to the vengeance of Heaven, as they used to do in the old-fashioned dramas when it was time for the curtain to come down, and it was not thought cheerful to have anyone killed.'

'Her own conscience,' said Gabrielle emphatically, 'will be her sufficient punishment.'

'Yes,' Fielding answered. 'I dare say; oh yes—exactly.'

'Under such conditions of education and life,' Gabrielle pleaded, 'we might have been all like her.'

'Well, no,' he answered, 'I think not. I think we should have been a little more true to our comrades, Gabrielle, you and I, even if we had been brought up in the slums.'

'But you don't know that she has not been true to anyone now. She has only accused herself.'

'Ah, yes, quite true,' Fielding said; and he dropped the subject. He would not at such a time communicate to Gabrielle the suspicions which were in his mind with regard to Paulina and her penitence.

Among the many sources of satisfaction which they had in the conditions of their new life was the fact that they were not on the most cordial terms with Mrs. Leven, and that they were not therefore supposed to render to her any manner of account concerning the life which they might resolve to lead. For the wisdom of the world and its respectabilities Clarkson and Gabrielle had marvellously little reverence, and they were quite resolved to live their own lives. But it was something of a relief to be free from the trouble of answering friendly remonstrances on the subject. As yet they had not any definite idea of what sort of life they were to lead, or even where it was to be led; and they put aside the merely practical part of the subject. They were determined to have their holiday to the very full of its enjoyment.

The house stood well on the side of a hill, and on the side looking southward; the greater part of the woods and grounds were on the other side. As Gabrielle and Fielding now stood in front of the house, they could see over a vast extent of country stretching away to the south. Below in the hollow, almost as it seemed at their feet, ran a brook that served as a boundary on that side to Wilberforce's demesne. The lovers stood a moment in silence and enjoyed the quiet beauty of the scene, and allowed its influence to steal upon them and to become part of their sensations and of their happiness. The ripple of the stream itself seemed to blend in with their thoughts and to be a part of the delight of their lives and of the dreams of their future. Sunset and a rippling stream will come up to the consciousness of this pair for ever after when they think of the opening of a happy married life. It will be inseparable from the thought, as a certain strain of music or the scent of

some flower is from many of our associations. For awhile they were silent. Gabrielle leaned upon his arm and they looked southward.

After a time, the attention of both became attracted by the strange appearance of the clouds that were piled up far away to the south.

All over the sky, except to the south and at this particular point, there was a peculiar clearness and brightness. The heavens were slightly purpling with the descent of evening, but there were hardly any clouds even at the west, where the sun would soon begin to sink. Only at the south, low down and forming a dense mass, were the yellow sulphurous clouds. They were so piled up and pressed together that they looked like some solid material object; like an irregular wall of yellow hills breaking the horizon line. A traveller on some broad plain in other latitudes sometimes does thus see on the horizon a yellow mountain-range suddenly arise alone and awful; and is impressed with a shuddering sensation, the sight is seemingly so unreal and yet is so real. At first, perhaps, he thinks he is but looking on a cloud-heap, and it is only after a while he feels convinced that it is a mountain-range. As Gabrielle and Clarkson looked southward each was for a moment inclined to think that the tawny mass was a hill of some kind, so fixed and solid did it seem; and only after some few moments of steady gazing did it become certain that no solid body was there, but a gathering of sulphur-coloured clouds. There was scarcely any motion or change perceptible while they looked. The rack did not dislimb. Gabrielle and Fielding stood in silence for a while, the eyes of each fixed on the same spot in the sky.

'How strange these masses of yellow clouds look! At the south, are they not?' Gabrielle said.

'At the south? yes; they seem to be over London,' Fielding answered. 'They tell of a coming storm. I know that look in the sky very well; but it is uncommon in these latitudes. It means a downright regular tropical sort of storm. We are out of it, Gabrielle; it is not coming our way. We have escaped from it. Come, is not that ominous of our future? So lovely, so divine a morning for our marriage; and then we get into the train and are carried away from the regions of the storm and brought safely down here. An omen! yes, an omen! I accept it.'

'But I hope there will be no harm done in London,' Gabrielle said anxiously. 'Will it be a great storm really, I wonder? I hope no harm will come to anyone we know.'

It seemed strange to think of harm happening to anyone as they stood in that sheltered and beautiful place. Fielding watched with absorbing interest the sudden look of anxiety on Gabrielle's face. It seemed to him so characteristic of her singularly unselfish nature. In the midst of her own new happiness she must stop to think of the chances of others who were not so happy, or who might be in danger. 'Are there many such women?' he asked himself as he looked into her eyes, 'or is there only one; and if so, by what strange chance is she given to me?'

'It will be nothing,' he said, soothing her. 'What is a storm in England? only a heavy shower of rain and a few chimney-pots blown down. I don't even know that that mass of clouds is really over London; only it is in the direction of London; and I thought somehow to-day, as we came down, that we seemed to be travelling out of the path of a storm. I confess I was selfish enough to be glad of it, Gabrielle: it looked so auspicious an omen. Let the storm come. Let it fall on Locksley Hall, as the egotistic lover says: he doesn't care what comes of Locksley Hall, once he is out of the place. Well, lovers are egotistic, disappointed or happy. I can't help feeling something of the same kind. Let it fall on Bolingbroke Place, if it will; it won't do much harm, I dare say.'

'No; I suppose no great harm comes of a storm in England. Still, the bare idea of anyone, perhaps, who is alive and happy now, being harmed or killed by something that seems trifling to us here—well, the truth is I am too happy, and my only trouble now is because I know there are others not so happy; that there are sad hearts; that there are eyes wet with tears of grief, while mine, my friend—I can't look up—are wet with tears of happiness.'

'Let us sit down here for a moment,' he said.

There was a wooden seat near them and they sat down, and she leaned on him, and for a while they were silent. Then they began to talk again. They talked of their plans and prospects, and of the future and the past, in low tones suited to the place and the hour and the conditions of their new life. They spoke of what was to be done with the money that Fielding would not accept and Gabrielle would not keep, and had many ideas about the way in which some good might most surely be made to come of it. Gabrielle was resolved to do something—she did not exactly know what—to make Janet Charlton happy. Both remembered afterwards the curious fact that neither mentioned the name of Robert Charlton. In truth, both Gabrielle and Fielding had a conviction somehow that things

were hopelessly wrong with Charlton, and each shrank from the intrusion of his name into the dreams and schemes of such an hour. They went over all the events of their past, according to the immemorial custom of lovers: the 'don't you remember' this day, that day, and the other; the times they met, the words they spoke, before either knew that the other loved; and the rest of the sweet purposeless talk which all the world talks when it is young and in love. Let us leave them to their love and their happiness, with the evening song of the birds and the soft murmur of the trees, and the ripple of the water; with the future bright before them, and the past endeared; let us leave them there and go our several ways.

THE END.

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